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**THE
ASSASSIN**
By Harlan Ellison

Special Science Feature

**WHAT WE WILL
FIND ON VENUS**

IMAGINATION
A GREENLEAF PUBLICATION

VOL. 9 NO. 8
ISSUE NO. 8



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The Editorial

We've got a couple of hard-hitting science fiction stories for you this issue. To start things off, our lead novel, *THE ASSASSIN*, is not a nice story—but then, neither is the society it portrays. It takes place just a little bit in the future, and paints a picture of complete rule by fear. The kind of fear that means plainly and simply—death. Imagine if you can a society where the cream of our youth is put into a special training program, indoctrinated and educated toward one goal: graduation as *killers*. It's a shuddery thought. But it makes for a gripping novel and points a warning finger squarely at us. It's the kind of story you won't like from an idealistic standpoint, but it's also a story you won't soon forget!

With juvenile delinquency on the rise, and no solution in sight, we sometimes wonder what will be the end result a century from now. It's easy for society to blame the parents or the general environment of kids "gone bad." But that isn't really the answer. Neither the cause nor the cure. You still have the individual to contend with. And, perhaps, that's the root of the problem. At least, that's the view Mark Reinsberg takes in his dramatic *THE VICIOUS DELINQUENTS*. This is a sore subject, but it needs a little public airing, and perhaps

an assist from science will go a long way toward solving the problem. Again, this is a story you won't easily forget. Plenty of food for thought to digest.

We haven't made a policy of presenting stories with a "message" in *Madge*, preferring to hit hard on the sheer entertainment side. But once in awhile we're putting an issue together and discover it's got plenty of "guts." This is such an issue. Hope you like it.

We'd like to make a special point here of calling to your attention the forthcoming November issue of our companion magazine, *SPACE TRAVEL*. On sale the last week in August, in addition to up-to-the-minute fact features on the burgeoning space age, the November *SPACE TRAVEL* features one of the finest science fiction novels we've ever read. It's entitled, *THE GODMEN*. It's written by Edmond Hamilton. And it creates the most vivid and awesome picture of the Universe imaginable. Can you picture yourself as an entity of pure force—able to project yourself across the void instantaneously—covering whole galaxies in a split second? Can you further picture yourself questing further and further—for the final answer to the Cosmos? Read the November *SPACE TRAVEL*with

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SPECIAL SCIENCE FEATURE

We know what the surface of the Moon is like, and we have a fairly accurate idea about Mars. But one planet we can only guess at is —

What We Will Find On Venus

by

Henry Bott

RESEARCH ENGINEER

FROM A COSMIC point of view there is little difference between a trip to Mars and a trip to Venus. From the intimate viewpoint of the men who will make the trip however—we, Terrans—there is a considerable difference. A consideration of this journey makes one of the most interesting exercises in celestial mechanics. This interest arises from the fact that to journey to any of the inner planets from the orbit of the Earth, that is, to Mercury or to Venus, a spaceship must “fall” toward the Sun, so to speak, unlike the “climbs” that must be made against Solar gravity toward the outer planets. And in this fall toward the Sun there is a paradoxical—only momentarily—aspect to the velocities involved.

The journey to Venus is an

interesting study in Kepler's planetary laws. These classic astronomical laws state (1) the planets move in ellipses, the common focus of which is the sun, (2) the line joining the sun and any given planet sweeps out equal areas in equal times, and (3) the square of the time of revolution of each planet is proportional to the cube of its mean distance from the sun. From a more inclusive attitude these laws can be combined with Newton's law of gravitation into what might be called “the spaceman's law” which states: “For any body which is in a stable orbit with another body, the sum of the first body's kinetic and potential energy with respect to the second, must be a constant.” Compressed in this rather windy and obscure statement is the fundamental law of space travel.

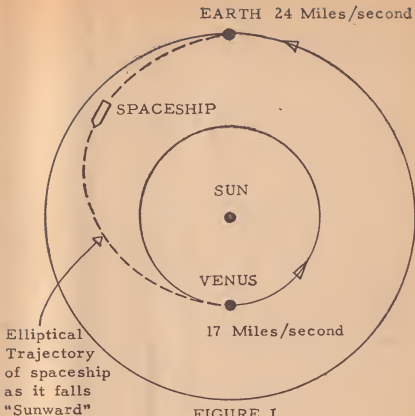


FIGURE I

Drawing illustrates hypothetical, but practical trajectory of space ship launched from Earth-satellite. Path is tangential to both orbit of Earth and orbit of Venus. Rocket motors have blasted tangentially to, and in direction of, Earth's orbit.

This law applies equally to the Moon in orbit around the Earth, an artificial satellite in orbit around the Earth, or for that matter, the planet Pluto in orbit around the

sun. Amplified, it means for example, the kinetic energy of the Earth (its mass multiplied by the square of its tangential velocity) plus the potential energy of the

Earth (its potential energy due to its position in the sun's gravitational field) must equal some constant quantity. Because the Earth's orbit is elliptical (slightly), its kinetic energy when it is closer to the sun is greater than when it is farther away, but by the same token, its potential energy is less. The sum of these two quantities however, is a constant.

Now what has this fact to do with Venus? Because it applies to any and all stable orbiting planetary objects, it has everything to do with Venus. Again, as we most often do, for simplicity's sake we shall assume that both Venus and the Earth rotate around the sun in circular orbits. Actually their differences are not great and are satisfactory for an approximation. Venus' mean distance from the sun is about sixty-seven million miles. The Earth's mean distance is about ninety-three million miles. Both planets are satellites of the sun. For them to be in stable orbits they must have specific velocities, easily calculated using the equation relating centrifugal force to the sun's gravitational attraction. Without performing the calculation it is evident that the nearer the planet is to the sun, the faster it must be travelling, just as Terran satellites near the Earth must travel faster than those more remote from it

Venus therefore is travelling faster than the Earth around the sun. We will assume that our hypothetical space ship is located on a space station far enough away from the Earth so as to make it unnecessary to consider anything but the fact that the space ship already possesses the velocity of the Earth.

What we desire is that the spaceship, which has a definite total energy made up of its potential and kinetic energies, decrease this total energy so that it will go into a stable orbit nearer the sun, specifically into orbit at the same distance as Venus! In a phrase it must fall toward the sun to the distance of Venus' orbit. If the time of "fall-off" is calculated carefully, it can be arranged that the spaceship will arrive in place in Venus' orbit at the same time as Venus does.

Therefore, the space ship must reduce its total energy. It can do this only in one way; it can reduce its velocity, by blasting its rockets *against* the direction in which the Earth is carrying it. As soon as its velocity is reduced, centrifugal force no longer balances it against solar gravity and it falls toward the sun, to a new orbit where again its potential and kinetic energies sum up to a new and lesser total. But it must balance again, the sun's gravitational field with its centrifugal force. Paradoxically this means *Its velocity must have*

increased in its fall! This is precisely the situation which occurs when a satellite gradually decreases its perigee and apogee and finally falls to Earth.

Let us repeat the Venusian trip once more. The spacemen blast their rockets tangentially against the Earth's orbital velocity. The rocket slows down relative to the sun, falls in toward it and picks up velocity sufficient to balance it once more in a new and stable orbit, this time closer to the sun. If all has gone well, this orbit is the same as the orbit of Venus, and the planet and spaceship, properly timed arrive at a point in space approximately the same.

This is just the converse of the Martian trip. On the Venusian trip the space ship had to lose potential energy and gain kinetic (but with a lesser total of the two than it had originally); on the Martian trip the space ship had to gain potential energy and lose kinetic (but with a greater total of the two than it had originally). What matters to the spacemen of course is the fact that in both cases chemical energy in the form of fuel had to be expended to attain these ends.

An understanding of this operation—it is slightly more complicated when considered in terms of the actual elliptical orbits—is an understanding of space travel which resembles nothing we experience

commonly now.

Under optimal timing, the Venusian trip would take approximately one hundred and fifty days, about a hundred days fewer than the Martian journey would take. This fact has been suggested as one reason why the Venusian journey might be earlier taken than the Martian one. As in the case of the Martian journey, the fuel and velocity problems are negligible compared with these problems in getting space ships off the Earth and into orbit, the problem of the manned satellite.

An interesting aspect of interplanetary travel is in that there is sufficient time to do these operations rather leisurely. Small mistakes and errors can be compensated for and of course there is adequate time in which to detect them. Neither of these pieces of good fortune exist for the men who will establish the manned satellite in orbit around the Earth.

Also, the Venusian journey would be drastically altered if chemical fuels were superseded by atomic fuels, a contingency we cannot rely upon.

Venus is a tantalizing enigma. We know the usual things about it; its distance from the sun is sixty-seven million miles, its year is two hundred and twenty-five Terran days, its orbital speed is about twenty-two miles per second, its

surface gravity is about 0.85g, its mass is eight-tenths that of the Earth, its diameter is seventy-seven hundred miles (200 miles less than that of Earth), and it has no satellites. Its escape velocity is about six miles per second.

And that just about summarizes what is known of Venus!

We don't know for example, whether Venus rotates, we don't know its axis, and we know almost nothing about its constitution in spite of bolometers and spectroscopes—and science-fiction writers. The spectroscope has shown that there is about a three-percent carbon dioxide concentration in the telescopically detectible atmosphere—but no water vapor. The atmosphere of Venus, so laden with carbon dioxide, can provide a tremendous heat trap for the infra-red radiation from the sun and hence it is likely that the planet is exceedingly hot. If there is no water this might mean a surface not unlike a desert.

OF ALL THE PLANETS in the Solar System, Venus is the most mysterious, more so than even the Outer Planets with the possible exception of Pluto. Even with the enormous refinement in astronomical observation that will be afforded by telescopes and other apparatus mounted on a manned satellite or mounted on the Moon, Venus

will resolutely preserve its mystery. That mystery will be uncovered only in one way—by space ship. The rocket engine is the major astronomical instrument of the future.

Undoubtedly, as in the case of the Moon and of Mars, the initial exploration of Venus will be made with what logically are being called "probes." These unmanned, robot rockets, equipped with photographic and eventually television transmitting apparatus, will be set into orbit around the planet Venus, and some will even be hurled to fiery destruction into the Venusian atmosphere in order to convey the last possible bit of information. We will probably be astounded by the quickness with which these rockets will be put into use once the manned satellite has been achieved.

Anyone who has ever looked at the "Evening Star"—it is so brilliant it cannot go unnoticed—must have been struck by the intensity of its light. This is accounted for by the high reflectivity of its "surface" atmosphere. Infra-red sensing equipment will penetrate this shining blanket to give us some idea of what kind of a surface we are going to land on. We will make the Venusian trip considerably less enlightened as to what we'll find, than when we make the Martian trip.

The Venus-bound rocket swings in orbit with the space-station from which it is to be launched. At a

precisely calculated time and position, its rocket motor is ignited. If it has already maximized its potential energy with respect to Earth, it can be considered to possess only the tangential velocity of the Earth. For the Venusian journey to begin, it is necessary only to "kill" the appropriate amount of this velocity and thus fall toward the sun in the long elliptical path that will eventually be tangent to Venus' orbit when Venus is in the contact position. For a few brief minutes the rocket motors will hurl their thrusting gases and then they will be silent. Like all chemically-powered space trips, the motors do not thrust for long and the major part of the journey is completed in free-fall, that is, "accelerationlessness".

Slowly but perceptibly the disc of the sun increases in diameter; before the tangent point is reached, any necessary minor corrections to the ship's trajectory can be made with momentary rocket thrusts—but the errors had better not be large—the return journey also must be made.

It is perfectly conceivable that possibly the trip might be made without tangential contact and that the spaceship will complete the rest of its elliptical orbit carrying itself past Venus, past Mercury and sun, out in the remainder of a sweeping ellipse that will return it

once more into contact with the Earth.

However we can presume that the initial trip certainly will be made with the object of at least going into orbit around Venus for observational purposes. The fact that the space ship is approaching the furnace of the sun is of no importance to the space crew. The highly polished side of the space ship is a suitable reflector of radiation so that it need absorb no more radiant energy than is required or desirable. Orientation of this facing can be controlled of course with the triple gyro, the mechanism capable of giving the space ship any positional orientation about three axes, that is desired. To remove the heat generated within the space ship by the mechanics of living and the mechanisms intended to support men, it is only necessary to use the familiar principle of radiating this energy away from the ship on the "lee" side, the side away from the gigantic oven of the sun.

The observational potentialities of this trip must be considered also. To get so near the sun will permit remarkable studies of the sun spots and solar prominences, which, though already well studied from the satellites, can be infinitely better analyzed at these distances.

The fact that the Mercurian orbit is within range will not go unnoticed either, but more will be

said about that.

Having initiated the necessary transfer velocity, the space ship now is in orbit around Venus. The opaque atmosphere of the planet will present no insuperable obstacles. True, to visible light it is a barrier and human eyes peering through the ports of the space ship will see nothing but a cloud-covered ball; visible light will not penetrate the murk.

But any object, any material thing is continually radiating infra-red light as a consequence of its temperature. Even at very moderate temperatures such as those of the human body, there is appreciable infra-red radiation. To the human eye this radiation, these beams of "light", are invisible. But to sensitized photographic film and to certain fluorescent materials, infra-red is perfectly useful radiation. You must remember having seen the photographs of persons and things such as warm irons, taken in darkened rooms. The "sniperscope" of World War II was capable of seeing in the dark in exactly the same way—by being sensitive to infra-red.

Venus by virtue of its temperature is radiating infra-red and we can presume that not all objects on the planet are at the same temperature. Therefore, to infra-red sensitive telescopes and television cameras, Venus is a visible object. The

sensitized surfaces of the receptor instruments present, by changing infra-red to 'visible light, a normal if unusual picture of what is before them. Consequently the cloud barrier of Venus presents only a moderate handicap to the explorers.

From the orbiting space ship, small exploratory rockets, not unlike the "ferry rockets" used to transfer persons from satellites to the Earth's surface, will be sent down to probe Venus. The reason for comparing these ferry rockets with those of conventional Terran practice is that Venus' atmosphere will offer a landing challenge of an aerodynamic characteristic. The winged ferry rockets will be sent down, equipped with infra-red sensitive cameras and television equipment and will continuously report back to the mother space ship from which they came. In that way a thorough and complete picture of conditions on the surface of Venus can be gotten prior to the attempt of the explorers to land a manned vessel on the planet.

As was stated previously we have no picture at all of what the surface of Venus is like in contradistinction to Mars about which we know a good deal. Hence any discussion of the nature of the Venusian surface can only be speculation.

It would be nice to think of Venus as a watery planet, a fertile, fecund land similar to the Earth in

its Jurassic period. It would be hopeful to imagine that this watery planet would be a rich source of life-forms different only in shape from those of Earth. It would be nice to imagine this planet as a promising source of interplanetary life no matter how primitive; unfortunately it is not likely to be this way.

Sanguine scientists have sought in vain for evidence of water vapor. If Venus were the watery planet, wreathed in vaporous clouds, as we have been prone to hope, and in our science fiction stories, imagine, we should have long since detected that water vapor by spectroscopic observation. But the spectroscope reveals no "aich-two-oh."

What then can Venus be like? As was suggested, the fact that the temperature of the planet is high because of the heat-trapping atmosphere of carbon dioxide, leads us to believe that this condition without water vapor, must make the planet akin to a desert. This does not preclude life of course, but neither does it encourage it. Without knowing whether or not other chemistries beside that of carbon will be found behind life, we can only guess that there is no life on Venus. But this is only reasonable speculation. Nature may have had other designs in mind.

The probe-rockets will reveal the planet's character to the orbiting

space ship and shortly thereafter ferry rockets will convey human beings to Venus. What they will find of course is unknown, but no one will doubt that the thrill of landing on the planet will be overwhelming.

IT IS POSSIBLE that the first exploratory group will not even land on the planet but may restrict themselves to purely orbiting the planet and acquiring their data remotely by means of the rocket probes. In the first trips to Venus, it is probable that only this will be done. But it will be enough.

Radio communication will be maintained by the expedition with Earth. As with a Martian exploration, the keyed and coded type of transmission will be used. It is conservative of energy.

Perhaps the actions of the exploratory group have been exaggerated. Because we have been presuming that chemical energy, the conventional chemical rocket, is the basic energy source of the expedition, we must remember that what the explorers are able to do is restricted. Naturally if nuclear power is available to them in the form of an equivalent rocket engine, this limitation would not apply. This must too remain purely a matter of speculation.

The exploration of Venus, like that of Mars, is limited by chemis-

try.

The jump through the sun's gravitational potential and its bringing the planet Mercury nearer from an energy standpoint makes the irresistible suggestion that perhaps a trip might be made there. This idea would be especially attractive if a regular space station were established in orbit around Venus. Remotely-guided, robot observational rockets could be sent to Mercury of course from the Earth space station, but everything would be eased by magnitudes of effort if the attempt were rather made from Venus.

If, as we most certainly must expect, a permanent space station is orbited around Venus, it will be a logical stepping stone to Mercury. As has been suggested many times, this jumping from space station to space station is not imaginative but realistic. It is the most economical way to make interplanetary journeys and it is what we will expect to see eventually; the idea of direct travel from one planetary surface to another is inconceivable except in the very remote future when chemical fuels have been supplanted by means which we are not yet unaware of.

Mercury in many respects offers a more interesting target for exploration than Venus. This view naturally is abetted and encouraged by our knowing more about the planet.

Its mean distance from the sun, about thirty seven million miles, makes it a tremendous solar observational station though that same nearness to the gigantic sun means tremendous work must be done against gravitational potential—solar. Never-the-less, exploration of its surface by the type of robot rocket probe we have been speaking of is an attractive probability.

It is hardly necessary to describe the sere bleakness of the airless Mercurian surface. If Venus is hot, Mercury is a furnace and the establishment of a colony there will draw on an undreamt of technology, probably weird beyond our imaginings. But the opportunity such a station would offer is also beyond imagining. Nuclear physicists of the future would be pleased to get that close to a perpetually operating hydrogen bomb! Such scientists however might think that they were *in* a hydrogen bomb, since it has been determined that the temperature of the sunward side of Mercury is of the order of eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The technological miracles necessary to enable men to live in such an environment seem beyond our immediate resources.

On the other hand, the unlit side of Mercury (its period of rotation coincides with its year), is at a temperature not far from that of solidified gases, and if any colonies

were established on the planet they would be located here. Short forays might be made to the hot side.

But to get back to the Venusian trip. In one sense we have been talking too glibly. Journeys of this sort require planning and preparation far beyond anything we are prepared for now and we must content ourselves with one modest objective at a time—and the Venusian trip is not exactly a modest one.

On a Martian or lunar exploration we can conjecture that landing on either of these bodies may lead to useful mineral discoveries, discoveries which might permit the manufacture of rocket fuels which would alter the state of interplanetary travel by several magnitudes. The same might be said of Venus. We have no reason to believe that there might not be suitable conditions on the planet for creating chemical fuels. No matter how forbidding the environment, human ingenuity is incalculable. Venus offers no sinecure, but neither is it hopeless.

We have not touched on the extraordinary feelings of accomplishment that a successful Venusian trip would generate in every human being. It is hard to imagine nationalism as being very meaningful when it is known that human beings have successfully conquered another planet, be it Venus or Mars. The

consequences of such a journey to the peoples of Earth, to their viewpoints, their differing psychologies, their political attitudes, will be overwhelming.

The return trip from Venus will differ very little from the original journey save that this time velocity will be added to the space ship in the direction of the Venusian trajectory. Again the space ship will pulse its motors momentarily in acquiring the necessary velocity. It will once more sweep out in a section of an ellipse which will end tangent to the Earth's course through the system. A matching or transfer velocity will return the space ship to the satellite after some one hundred and fifty days of travel.

The hazards of this trip as well as those of the Martian journey have been minimized. Meteoric collision, illness aboard the vessel, dangers we cannot yet imagine—these things while mathematically and statistically negligible—nevertheless are possible. The psychological effect of isolation in space, the sense of aloneness and remoteness, are still to be experienced. But whatever they are, they will not prevent the trip from being made.

We are on the threshold of such a breath-taking experience, this jumping off into space, that, because we have spoken, talked and imagined so much about it, we have lost the sense of wonder and

astonishment that must really accompany it. It is like an experience which has been anticipated for too long a time.

There will not be a refreshment of this sense of wonder at the newness of human experience until the first Lunar jump is made. When this is done, people will realize what the Venusian and Martian trips can mean.

To capture this feeling of awe and magnificence in wonder is simple. The next time you have an

opportunity to view the gleaming "Evening Star", unwinking and unglittering, but shining with an intense radiance, remark to yourself that in a matter of time—measured by years and decades, not centuries—men are going to that planet. "Planet" means "wanderer." But the wanderers are going to be roaming humanless not very much longer. And Venus may very well be the first of the wanderers to be touched by human beings . . .

THE END

★ *The Glittering Orb* ★

IN all the talk of interplanetary travel, from its inevitable forthcomingness to the places men will visit, the most prominent celestial body is neglected. What of the Sun?

When we are eventually in space, it is true that the Sun will be an object of intensive study, not only from purely the astronomical viewpoint, but also from the physicist's view—where else is there a "living" atom bomb—going all the time?

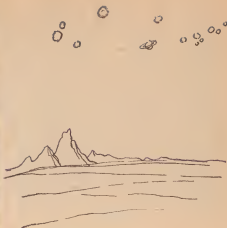
But the question is, "How close will we go to the Sun?" Assuming that eventually atomic power will remove the barrier of fuel from rocket travel there is no reason why men should not go to Mercury, the planet which must resemble The Inferno.

It is also conceivable that with the accelerative progress of physical science, that physical, power driven

probes might enter the fringes of the Sun's atmosphere, there to sample, test, and weigh the workings of the furnace inconceivable.

What is the value?—knowledge of course. But more than that—useful knowledge, knowledge which might tell us the nature of space itself! The fantastic gravitational field of the Sun is a laboratory unimaginable even in the fury of an atomic bomb. No gravitational forces can compare with the Sun's—at least forces so near to Man.

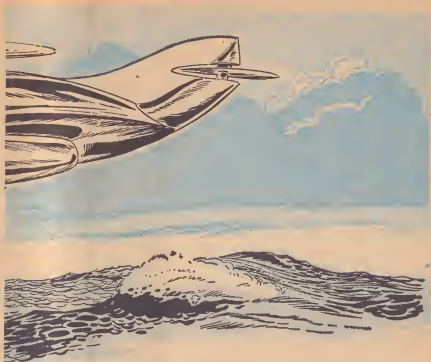
The space Stations on Mercury will be proud places—places where the secrets of space and time someday will be unraveled. It is nearly certain that in some way unknown to us, space and time are manifestations of a oneness. The explorers of Mercury, practically on the Sun's surface will have a good deal to say . . .



scheffy

"We're coming to the part of your plan I don't like."





He had been highly trained since childhood; he had been taught to do one thing, and to do it well. He had been taught to kill. For he was —

THE ASSASSIN

by Harlan Ellison

WHEN THEY BROUGHT Juanito Montoya was a thin, sallow-faced youth with a twitch to his eyelids and a feral stealthiness to his home in the Pampas,

his manner. He had lived—an orphan at the age of nine—off the land, with no one's help, but simply the fleetness of the young and the rapacity of the ever-hungry.

The Seekers had found him sleeping in the bombed-out shell of a cathedral in a wasted little village deep in the heart of Argentina; and since he had killed two of their number with sling-and-dart in an effort to avoid capture, they refrained from burning him to ashes. He barely spoke, even during the struggle, but short, tiny animal sounds came through the layers of dirt that covered his face. So they kept him alive; they captured him with the evening twilight covering them, feeling he was a definite possibility, that he would fit in to the ways of the School. And they brought him in.

Trussed, gagged, and impounded in a force-mesh.

There had been no trouble spiriting the boy out of Argentina; not so much because it was merely another section of AmericaState, but because the Seekers were beyond petty boundaries and interests.

They were the Seekers from the School.

Without the School, who knew *what* might happen in the world?

So they had had no difficulty bringing pipe-limbed and furious Juanito Montoya to the School.

All the way in the night-shrouded

black jetcopter, the boy struggled in his invisible force-bonds, struggled in his wrist-slicing wire trusses, struggled against the mask adhesive that covered his lower face. Impotently he seethed, and the fear mounted in him like a crazy red monkey, gibbering along his nerves till he felt faint with terror. Who were these black-hooded men who had come to the tiny village? He could only see their little scarlet eyes through the slits in the hoods, and the sight made him dizzy, fascinated with the dizziness. Who were they—and his eyes widened over the adhesive—where were they taking him?

Juanito was not old enough to be a coward. Far from it; indeed, he had seen too much, lived too fast and too wildly to have even become one, had he known the way of going about it. But this was the unknown. This was a nightmare spawned from up North, where things always happened with evil ways.

This is not the good thing, he thought, in his simple, unaffected way.

While the jetcopter sped on near-to-silently through the night. And soon passed into dawn and later the day.

Juanito was a perceptive boy. At fifteen he could effectively disable a column of foot-soldiers while sniping from cover, with his sling and

dart. He knew the best ways to skin a rabbit and eat it without getting sick. He knew what fire could do, and he knew what smoke could do. He knew the whys and hows and wheres of looting, skulking, hiding . . . surviving.

In a country devoid of warmth or culture or freedom for nearly eighty years, Juanito had done remarkably well for himself. He had neither been caught nor killed. He did not even have a red flag on his dossier at AmericaState Records.

In point of fact, he did not even have a dossier.

He was a cipher to the great State. Thus, he was perfect fodder for the School. Young, quick-witted, fit to survive, able to murder without compunction, unknown and most important—in the grip of the Seekers. His trip to the School was a long one, but uneventful.

HIGH IN THE ROCKIES, the School stood grey and silent from without—if seen at all—while within it was light and efficiency and the sounds of training. It had been built to withstand the winds of time, thrust into the straight-walled neck of a volcanic chute. A tube of rock, thirty feet thick was the neck of the tube, and like a pencil stuck down inside a roll of notepaper, the School had been built within that chimney rock. Its

walls were molybdenum steel, reinforced with cross-grained layers of duroplast and concrete blocks within. It was solid, and invisible from any angle, save above. But even from above it was protected, for a force bubble and a spy-net had been erected over the mouth of the tube, and any foreign matter—as large as a bomber, as small as a gnat—passing over the tube without beamed permission, was automatically destroyed by the polarized-energy force beams from a battery below. The School stood as solid as the Earth beneath it; quiet outside, anxious within, and constantly working, turning out its students with regularity and thoroughness.

This was AmericaState's little-known, deeply-feared School—for assassins.

It had been erected shortly after the War, when the great AmericaState that stretched from one end of the continent to the other had discovered a million little dynasties founded and festering within its very bosom. The School had been founded and the men had been trained on sound principle: with that many small monarchies flourishing from Tierra del Fuego to Point Barrow, from Pernambuco to San Francisco, the thought of sending the worn and decimated AmericaState armies to grind them out and do away with their leaders,

was beyond consideration. It was lions chasing shadows, tiring the lions till they lay easy prey for the shadows, who were truly maggots and hyenas and vultures.

The jobs could be done by one man each, if they were the right kind of men. If they were killers, if they knew every means of torture and murder ever conceived, and if they conceived a few of their own when they needed them. Then the State could be kept in its stability of power, and the War would not rage again. If the men were assassins.

So the School had been founded and the men had been trained. Trained for their work with one philosophy hard as diamond, cold as snow, constant as life, final as death. Death was important to them; they lived with it, and their work was dedicated to it. Their philosophy: death is preferable to failure. Get in, kill, and get out fast!

The School had been built. It had been doing its work with unbelievable thoroughness for over seventy years. To the School for assassins they brought fifteen-year old Juanito Montoya. That was in 2179. Time went swiftly.

2184.

"Down on your stomach!"

"Yo! Up on your feet!"

"Run in place!"

"Throw down on your stomach!"

"Flip over!"

"Up, without hands!"

"Run in place!"

"Cutaway! *Drop* damn you, I said cutaway!"

"Up!"

"Cutaway!"

"Up!"

"Cutaway, cutaway, cutaway, cutaway, BREAK TIME!"

Thirteen (who considered his name good luck, as compared to little Seven in the Apprentice Class who had an affinity for accidents despite his supposedly luck-filled name) met Twenty-two outside the gym.

Thirteen was a tall, slim boy with wedge-shaped hands, so excellent for night work such as strangulation, bear-walking over hot coals on an approach route, underwater demolition and strangulation. That was important, strangulation. They had heard in the School only last week that a man who had been Fifty-five in Class 338 had disposed of a Regent-General in the ridiculous Court of Harpor, somewhere in Oklahoma using his hands alone. Strangulation was important; hadn't the man received a posthumous plaque on the memory wall in the Chapel?

Thirteen was proud of his hands. He flexed them constantly, while talking, and though he was inordinately vain about them, mani-

curing them and looking at them, and though he was a bit on the simpering side, occasionally speaking with a lisp, his abilities with his hands kept all laughter from his classmates lips.

Twenty-two was shorter, nearly a head shorter, with the dark, wavy hair and snapping ebony eyes of the Latin. Though he spoke with the soft lilt of the Latin, also, and made sharp, small, evocative gestures with his slim hands, he had nothing of the fragile gentleness of the inner Latin spirit. Nor did he have the fiery outer appearance. He seemed something quite set apart, with a twitch to his eyelids. A nervous flicker that was heat lightning on the horizon. Here and there and gone and only partially glimpsed.

He was not well liked in his class, for his eyes were too hungry, and his manner too brisk. He walked close to walls, and talked with his back to one, constantly. He walked as though he were about to be attacked, and his manner of speaking made it perfectly clear that he suspected you had just that in mind. But Thirteen was his friend, for they were nothing alike, and that will happen.

Thirteen was a born clown who had been re-educated as a killer. Twenty-two was born to rip and tear, a natural instinctive killer.

But now both were killers. In

that they were alike, but otherwise they were the opposite poles of the magnet. A thing which strangely attracted one to the other.

"I wish to God they'd spread that gravel on the gym floor without so damned many sharp rocks in it," Thirteen grumbled, picking tiny bits of stone from his palms. "Those cutaways are murder in a rock field."

Twenty-two smiled quickly, thinly. "You beef too much, Jock."

He caught himself, and turned white. Thirteen gripped him, hard. Thirteen angled him into the alcove, hand on bicep. The alcove was shallow, where the water cooler hung from the ceiling, but it was out of the way of the hordes of students, rushing down the corridor. "Juanito, you've got to remember! They're cracking down on using proper names. I know it's just a new idea they've started this year, but they want it that way, and you can't buck them. I thought you'd stopped using names months ago. What if a proctor heard you?

"What the hell do you want to do, get us both sent to Isolate?"

Twenty-two nudged the other off with impatient palms. "Okay, okay—sorry, I forgot. I forget sometimes, that's all; listen, I wasn't born in this lousy School you know? I lived outside once . . . not in a creche like all the rest of you guys."

"Yeah, and you weren't alive once," Thirteen jabbed back roughly. "Watch yourself or you'll be back in that condition. By way of the furnace room."

Twenty-two nodded firmly. "Okay, okay. No proper names while we are within these hallowed walls. Two hundred and thirty-six more days, no names. You are Thirteen to me, sir."

"You're the strangest cat I ever knew," Thirteen said, aiming a bolo punch at Twenty-two. It missed, for it was intended to miss, and they walked on toward the snack bar for a bite to eat before the next class, razors. They grinned at each other youthfully, arrogantly.

IN THE SNACK BAR, the sounds of the monolog for today rolled hypnotically from the wall speakers. It was a lecture on makeshift bludgeons for emergency occasions:

"... across the bridge of the nose will smash the bone structure and send splinters into the brain, bringing instantaneous death, if the blow is sharp and inward. Should no such heavy weapon be at hand, a newspaper may be folded the long way four times, folded over across the front, and folded once more to make a tight wedge. This wedge, when held firmly in the hand, with the folded end protruding, has the effective impact power of an M-5 blackjack. A

stocking, filled with gravel, dirt—tightly packed—or coins, will serve approximately the same purpose, with the warning that such utensils are not reliable for more than a momentary stunning, if any point of impact but directly behind the right ear is used. In the event . . ."

Twenty-two ignored the monolog as best he could; it was gauged on all mental hands to impress itself onto the core of memory in each student's mind. It was not necessary to be listening to the monolog, for it reached beyond mere awareness. This was one of the primary training aids used in the School. By day or night, sleeping or eating, at work or during proscribed play times—the monologs went on. A new one each day. Marksmanship, proper use of collodin for disguises, how to wire a jetcopter to time-explode, nine hundred and forty gases that can cripple without killing, the Maori methods of inducing a prisoner to speak his mind, native and abnormal psychology; the subjects were endless and with each new day a new spool was strung into the sono-box, and the monolog began, long before the students were out of their hammocks, long after they had retired to them again.

So it was not precisely "ignoring" that Twenty-two managed. It was more nearly relegation to a sub-level of attention. While he shoved

his way through the off-class crowds in the snack bar, he kept watch for Thirty-eight in class 401. That was one class further along than Juanito's own 402. Thirty-eight would be graduating day after tomorrow. Before that happened, Juanito knew he must worm the name from the student assassin.

He had encountered Thirty-eight at a Combats Meet over a year ago; he had been teamed with the stout assassin in the lectro-whip event, and between bouts, when they had been getting their bodies greased with non-conducting swabbing oils, they had talked.

Juanito remembered that discussion well. It had gone:

"My name is Grice. John Grice from Rio Cuerto; that's in Argentina."

It had been inevitable, actually. The Seekers covered a great deal of territory. They took many men from many parts of AmericaState. It was, in fact, a curious thing that Juanito had not met a fellow areaman sooner. But he had perked up, then. He had been in the School for slightly less than four years at that time. He had been miserable, and elated at the same time, all during those years. For he was a creature of freedom, and the restricted, martial life of the School gnawed at his sense of dignity and roving desires. Yet he was joyful to be in the School, for he was

learning what he most wanted to learn. How to kill. He had lived in the ruins too long to think success and escape came with luck. It was stealth and skill. And here in the School, he was absorbing the most vital and electric ways of pouncing and preying. He had vowed when he was graduated, he would take his first assignment, and the School would never hear of him again. With the School training, he could surely elude or outfox or outfight any Seekers who came after him.

But that had been years before, and now four years later, here was an areaman. An Argentinian, and from so close to Juanito's old environs.

"Yes, of course," Juanito had replied eagerly. "I am from Argentina myself, and from very near Rio Cuerto. I lived everywhere on the Pampas. My name is Montoya. Juanito Montoya. Or Twenty-two, if these oiler slaves can understand Speak."

The School had its own language. A secret blend of all that was fluid and philologically valuable in Spanish, French, English and German, with the preciseness of the Portuguese, and the absence of complexity to be found in Esperanto. They called it Speak. It was a primary password in itself; if another person in the darkness could Speak, then he was partway to be-

ing identified as another student of the School.

They spoke to each other in Speak, and Thirty-eight grinned hugely. "These oilers can barely speak at all, much less understand us. They are brought in from the surrounding countryside by the Seekers, and hypno-trained for one or two jobs—see?" He booted his oiler in the back, knocking the poor, dumb worker onto his side. The oiler got to his knees, a cloddish smile—more idiotic than complacent—breaking his rough features, and thanked the stout assassin profusely in broken English.

"Go on back to work," John Grice commanded imperiously.

The oiler went to work on Grice's thighs with the grease applicator.

JUANITO HAD MUCH respect for this big assassin. He was the model of what a good, well-trained student should be. He carried himself high, and he had a steely glint to his green eyes that marked shrewdness, and he knew how to make men bend to his will. As loftily imperious as he seemed now, in the field he would be either one of a crowd, or hidden as he lurked in waiting, or bravery personified charging an enemy. Juanito wanted to be just like him, and feared he was not.

"When did you get here?" Grice asked absently, as though he were

being polite, his thoughts turned elsewhere already.

"I've been here almost four years now," Juanito answered smartly.

"Ah!" Grice caroled. "Then you'll be ready for the Probing soon, won't you? Or have you been to the Probing labs yet?"

Juanito nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, they Probed me just last week."

Grice's full-fleshed face took on a superior confidence. "I came up with only four myself. They later negated three of them. How about you?"

Juanito looked surprised for an instant, then said levelly, "There was only one in my banks. They haven't been able to trace it. The name was Eskalyo."

Grice had looked perturbed then, and annoyed, and his brow had furrowed. "Are you making fun of me?"

Juanito was confused. "I don't know what you mean."

"How did you know Eskalyo was one of the names in my bank? The one they can't clear. Have you been prying in the records, or are you a check-point spy for Security-Seek?"

Juanito had hastily explained, and soon convinced Grice he was serious, and in no way making fun of the other.

They were talking about the Probing. Each student was forced

to undergo a mind probing after he had been in the School close to four years—during which time his memories and thought processes would have been altered enough by the training and the monologs to allow the Probe to do its work peculiarly and properly—to find if there were any names from the petty Monarchies in the memory banks of assassin trainees. There were usually a few names, either picked up through childhood rumor or from isolated cases of actual contact. And the Probe dug these out, and tried to check them. Usually they negated most of the references dug out, as being mentioned during adolescence. But occasionally, as in the case of Eskalyo being in Juanito's and Grice's mind, the trackback could not be affected.

These were the cases the School and the Probers were most interested in locating, for they invariably contributed some information as to the locating and possible abolition of the Monarchy and its petty-ruler.

Thus the two students had talked of Eskalyo, and Juanito pieced together the scant data his own Probing had revealed, with the facts Grice's mind had vomited up, and he discovered a strange thing.

He discovered that he had seen the man known as Eskalyo three years after he was supposedly found

and charred by a group of Seekers.

This was startling in itself, but the other thing Juanito Montoya learned from pieced-together information, was all the more bizarre and memorable:

He—Juanito, Twenty-two—was the son of Eskalyo, the ruler of the petty Monarchy called Ciudad Rosario. It did not become clear at first, but as Grice rambled on, speaking of those things he knew from childhood, deeper than thought, of the things he had seen and heard, it became clear to Juanito that the son of Eskalyo, of whom Grice spoke, fitted the deeds and description of the deeds and description Juanito held.

It was he, Juanito Montoya, who had fled his father when the Seekers had come. It had been himself, the boy who had narrowly escaped death a hundred times, and shocked into a tense forgetfulness of his origins. He recognized the indefinite incidents Grice spilled out from vague, childhood memory; he recognized them as till-now lost fragments of his youth.

The flight from Ciudad Rosario. The burrow he had dug on the edge of an old irrigation ditch as the Seekers 4th Armored Regiment had gone past. The killing of small game to sustain life. It all came back now, and he knew he was the son of Eskalyo.

The son of the ruler of a petty

Monarchy, somewhere in what had been South America.

And it had set his mind to whirling.

That had been a year before.

Now Grice was about to graduate, and though Juanito had met with him many times since that day in the Combats Meet, the stout assassin had told him little more that could aid Juanito in his plan. For he had formulated a cunning plan, from the linked scraps of information.

No really valuable information had come from Thirty-eight's lips. Until one day, a week before. He had hinted that all his knowledge of Eskalyo was not from childhood, and handed-down. He had hinted that he knew a way for a man to reach Eskalyo *now*. He had shied a verbal rock into the deep water of Juanito's consciousness, and it had skipped across, finally sinking and carrying conviction to act with it.

For Grice had said he knew the name of a man in the AmericaState Chambers—torture chambers—in N. Chicago who was a contact to Eskalyo. And Juanito Montoya *had* to find out that name; *before* Thirty-eight graduated day after tomorrow.

But Grice was nowhere among the surging crowd in the snack bar.

Juanito felt his nerves tighten like piano wires; like the rubber

bands they attached to the rigged braces on his teeth, when they wanted him bucktoothed for some disguise; like the tightrope they were required to walk during physical training. He knew time was sifting slowly but swiftly into the past, and he *must* learn that name.

Thirteen yanked at his arm. "Hey, what do you want? We're next."

Juanito looked up and saw they were indeed at the head of the line, and how they had gotten there, he did not know. "Oh, I don't know. Hell, just get me a coca-cola fix without double-shoot."

"I thought today was *your* pay?" Thirteen giped back sharply.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," Juanito hastily amended. "My pay."

HE DUG INTO the hip slit of his body-tight training uniform of black duroplast, and brought out a handful of the plastoid slips used for currency in the School. "What do you want?"

"I'm low, cat, how about a glucose-herro feed with a twist of lemon peel . . . or no, make it straight; I'm that low."

Juanito edged up to the robo-mech and dialed what he wanted. In a moment the two vials came slithering down the trough, followed by two screw-on needles and a pair of chaser pills.

He put his plastoid slips in the

receiver and the little glass plate over the trough rolled back, allowing him to take the narcotics from the machine.

They moved out of the press, into a corner, and unplugged the ends of their vials, screwing the needles into the syringe-vials, piercing the protective seals. Thirteen was a sock feeder. He liked his snacks hard and fast. He hit the main line through the fabric of the skintight suit without even rolling the sleeve. A beatific smile spread unbidden across his mouth, and a low, soft air-whooooosh of abhhh came from him. He sagged against the wall, and hit one twitch with his left foot boom!

Juanito had never taken to the constant stimulation of the assassin. He wanted no fanaticism or herrococaine fogging. He wanted to do what he had to do cool and calm and sweet.

He took his coca-cola fix slowly, feeding it into the bloodstream, drawing it out intermingled with the scarlet fluid, feeding it back in, drawing it out again—kicking it higher—and at last sending it into the bloodstream for its final journey.

It was good. His insides felt cola-happy. But not fogged and hopped-up. His small colon felt sticky good.

Thenmmmn throoo thuh guh-uh-uh-ood uvvv thuh feelinnnguhhh, *he snapped to alertness!* Grice had

come into the snack bar. He was avoiding the fix machines, and heading right for the sandwich counter. He was eating solid food. That must mean he had finished classes, was through his processing, was even perhaps assigned already. He had to get to him now.

With his steps faltering from the fix, and his head higher than his body by three feet, Juanito grubbed in his hip-slit for more plastoid slips, fed them nervously into the stabilizer-robomech. It sprayed his face with a neutro-compound, and the fix was diluted in his blood. He was able to function again.

He had not even felt himself walking across the big snack bar to the neutro machine. But now he knew what he was doing, and he elbowed roughly past clots of students, keeping the stout, tight back of Grice firmly in sight.

He caught the assassin by the elbow, and the stout man whirled on him, the feral eyes narrowed—as any good assassin's eyes would narrow under sudden attack.

"What do you want?"

Juanito was shocked and battered back momentarily by the rudeness of the other's tone.

"I—I wanted to speak to you a moment."

"Make it fast. I'm on the way out."

"You, uh, you know a name . . . say, let's go out in the corridor

where we can talk more eas—”

“We can talk right here. Say, I haven’t got anything to talk with you anyhow, Twenty-two. So why don’t you get your hand off me before there’s trouble in here.” His soft-edged face was soft no longer. It was hard and set. He was not joking; there was nothing to say.

Juanito recognized the futility of pressing his point.

He turned and strode away, showing through the crowd quickly.

At one point in his passage, Thirteen flopped a flaccid hand onto his shoulder, muttering under the effects of the heavy fix. Juanito shook the hand off, and left the snack bar.

He signed the class register for “private study” and went to his cubicle to think. Where he could be alone.

IT TOOK SOME DOING, but it had been the only way. After Grice had graduated and been assigned, Juanito had to wait for his time. One night it came, when he was assigned an all-week Awake Alert—a rigorous test of his stamina which involved the student remaining awake and sharp for seven full days. During the fifth night, he was able to employ the very break-in tactics he had been taught, to rifle the memory banks of the compUvacs in AmericaState Records, School sub-division. The

assignment records. He found the punch-spool he wanted; the list of assignments of assassins in class 401. Grice’s class.

He spun the spool onto the treads, and turned on the emergency power for the smallest comp-Uvac in the office . . . emergency power that would not wake the School, or set off the specially-triggered alarms hooked to the energy outlets. It was enough to start the mighty machine working at softer levels, and though the information was dim in the glow-box when he read it, he engraved it in his mind carefully.

The frame of light read:

401: 38 GRICE, JOHN GREGORY, Rio Cuerto, Argentina ent:

5 Oct 2178; grad: 4 Oct 2184;
rating: AAA plus assgnd: Persistence Sqd, N. Chicago, TDY Alaska Hi.

Juanito read it again to make certain he had it correct, then cut the power, re-spun the reel by hand, and loaded it back into its bin. He sat in the darkness of the Records offices, thinking.

Grice had been assigned to the Persy Squad on constant clean-and-mop-up detail in New Chicago. But he was currently on TDY, or loan, to the Hi Guard in Alaska, for some job or other.

That meant Juanito had to get himself assigned to Alaska, and fast. He had to see Grice again,

under conditions more favorable to Juanito's worming some intelligence from the stout assassin as to who the man in the N. Chicago Chambers was. It was only fifty-four days till graduation and he knew many assignments were already cut. He had to do some fast maneuvering of his orders, or lose out completely.

He pondered the problem for well over a week, trying desperately to drag a solution from the welter of information he held, and the need to find the man in the New Chicago Chambers. Finally, he thought he had hit on an answer; perhaps not the best answer, but one that would do for now.

He went to see the head Probesman.

"Probesman Languor," he said, when he had been seated in that worthy's cubicle, "A thing has been troubling me."

And the Probesman, whose mien and manner were much like those of priests in the world outside the School, replied, "Yes, student brother? Is there a thing with which I can help?"

Juanito nodded, studying the Probesman. The man was no fool. He was big, with a face hewn from granite and lead. His eyes were small, deepset blue circles at the centers of ringed bulls-eyes that were dark around the eyes. His mouth was a hard, wired line that

bespoke sternness before mercy. He was no fool, this Probesman Languor.

"Ever since my Probing, over a year ago, sir, I have waited for clearance from SecuritySeek on the name Eskalyo in my banks—" he noted with inner satisfaction that the Probesman started at mention of the South American's name, "—but no such clearance has come, and I feel impure, sir."

The Probesman's small eyes narrowed down even more, till he studied Juanito through impossible slits. "Oh?"

It was the game of silence now. Who could say the least, and learn the most; for no student *ever* came to a Probesman, unless there was good cause. The Probers were the pariahs of the School. They were the brain-pickers; their job was a necessary one, but who could have respect or affection for a man who knew your every intimate thought and hidden fear and concealed shame? They were more than tolerated, for they were specially-trained, also, for their jobs. But they were never approached as men—only as Probesmen. The affectation of holiness they clung to was a defensive air held over from their first days.

Juanito played the game: "Yes."

They sat silently, looking into each other's eyes.

"Uh—what would you have me

do?"

"Have you a suggestion, Probesman?"

"None, for I know not what your problem may be. Can you be more definite?"

"Well, it is touchy."

"Go on."

"I have no real wish to go on."

The Probesman was growing exasperated with the student assassin's hedging and dodging. He lunged verbally: "Well, why have you come to me, then, if you don't want a solution to your problem?"

Juanito stepped into the off-guard opening in the conversation. "I am impure, for there has been no clearance on the name 'Eskalyo' and I want to do penance with a difficult assignment."

The Probesman stared from within the secret caves of his eyes. There was a subterfuge, here, he was certain of that. Why had he not pulled this fellow's dossier before admitting him, and tried to glean some hint of what Twenty-two was after. He continued to stare at the young, darkeyed assassin with the black hair, but the face before him revealed nothing.

"Where would you suggest?" he asked.

Juanito spread his hands. "That is for you to say. I have no suggestion, but I know your Probe recommendation goes with every order-cutting. If you recommended

an especially difficult assignment, I'm sure I would get it."

The Probesman said nothing.

Then, "Well, what do you consider a difficult assignment?"

Juanito was careful: "The Court of Harper, perhaps, or Valhalla in New York, or with the Alaska Hi Guard, or even the Seekers 4th Armored in the Everglades . . . I have no choice."

"I will think about it," said the Probesman, carefully. "I will think about it, and if I find you are sincere, you might very well get your wish. In fact, you may regret having come to see me."

"Why should that be?" asked Juanito.

"Things are bad, especially with the Hi Guard, you know that, don't you?"

Juanito nodded. "Yes, that was one of the reasons I mentioned them. I knew it was the severest test I could be asked to stand, but I did not wish to express any preference." The Probesman watched him even more carefully. What was behind that nervous, trembling face? Was there some coup this assassin was trying to bring about? What?

"I will think on it."

Juanito rose, and bowed out of the Probesman's presence. He was not at all surprised, when his orders came through, the day before graduation, when they ordered him

to the Alaska Hi Guard. He was not surprised at all. For the Probesman had obviously gone back and read the dossier on Twenty-two. He had undoubtedly seen the name Eskalyo. That was why he was on his way to the frozen North.

To the Hi Guard.

Where John Grice was TDY. Temporary duty to the Hi Guard. And the secret name of a man in New Chicago.

THERE WERE ALWAYS stories circulating around the cadre rooms about how pleasant it was in Alaska in the Summer. How clean it smelled, and how green the grass was, and how clear the skies. And no snow.

Those stories failed to make the distinction that down more toward what had been North America, this was so, but that up past White Horse, in the farthest reaches of AmericaState, it was *always* cold.

Juanito Montoya found this to be all too true. His jetcopter came down through a swirling madness of snow and sleet and found the landing chute only with difficulty. The storm was a perpetual one, raging about the Hi Guard GHQ with such ferocity that the dome was obscured, formless for twenty feet from its plasteel walls.

Juanito was billeted underground, in the far right wing of the GHQ. The building was constructed with

regard for easy entrance—to authorized personnel—and egress. Above-ground all that showed was the dome, which sank its body fifty feet into the ground; radiating out from either side of the dome's base were the corridors for all-work.

When he was settled, Juanito reported to the commanding officer, a sleeping specimen named Posteur, whose eyes were lidded and whose face was pale.

"I see you have only an AAA rating, Montoya," Posteur ran a slim finger down the check-in sheet. "Why did you lose out on that plus after the three A's? You did exceptionally well in the School."

Juanito cared very little for this inquisition. He knew as soon as he was settled in he would be on his own, and the only time he would see this man was on pay day, when punishment was required, or when a special briefing was to be held. The assassins were one-man teams, without strings.

"I had an uncleared name in my banks, sir," Juanito tossed off. He was anxious to find Grice and get out of the cold of Alaska. He had no idea how he would make Grice talk, nor even how he would escape from the Hi Guard once he got the information, *if* he got the information.

"Oh, that's very interesting," Posteur replied. He slid down in his chair, resting his chin on his chest,

and clasping his slim fingers easily. "I've always contended the politics of the man doesn't make him a good fighter. The reverse holds true, also."

Then, as though realizing he should not be conversing so openly with one of his men, Posteur sat up straighter and asked, "Well, now that you're here, how much do you know about the trouble we've got—what you're expected to do?"

Juanito spread his capable hands. "I'm unfamiliar with the situation, sir, in particulars. I was led to believe you have a serious problem with a group known as the Irregulars."

Posteur nodded soberly, indicating in that nod that whatever Juanito had heard, it would not be nearly enough. "Ah. So. You've heard but an edge of what we are suffering with up here.

"It's not as simple a problem as with the Militia in Oklahoma. They can kill Harper, and his Court falls to pieces. In New Chicago, all they have is a mop-up daily, but up here we have a peculiar situation.

"The men who call themselves the Irregulars are the last of a detachment of snipertroops dropped by the RuskieChinks near the end of the war, who mated with a bunch of half-breed women up here. These are their kids. Somehow, and don't ask me where or how because that's what we want to find out, they

trained their kids in the one thing they knew: infighting. The kids—by the way, those troops must have multiplied like rabbits, the air or something up here—are all over this area. They tear up fuel lines as if we weren't around, they kill our squads when we send them out, they wreck hell all along the line here.

"Now if there was a central organization, it would be a simple one-assassin job. But there is no organization, merely clans and families who live off the plunder they can roust from us, and by fur-trapping."

Juanito listened with half an ear. This was boring and time-consuming. He wanted to find Grice.

"Sir, excuse me," Juanito decided abruptly to break off this jabber. "Is there an assassin named John Grice here? An expert in duoprene disguises, I believe? He's on temporary duty, assigned to New Chicago, do you know him?"

Posteur looked confused for a long moment, then gradually drew himself out of his bewilderment, and nodded. "Yes, I know him. Why?"

"A friend, sir. He was in the class that graduated before mine. I wanted to see him again."

"Ah. So." Posteur puffed against his closed lips. "What has that to do with the problem here, and your job, Montoya?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Then why interrupt me?"

"Sir, I believe there's more to Grice than you've been told," Juanito lied, on the spur of the moment. It had suddenly occurred to him that Posteur might take action against him if he brought too much unfavorable attention to bear on himself. So he lied quickly, slyly, with survival as his foremost thought, and survival being the reaching of Grice—for getting to Ciudad Rosario and Eskalyo had become an obsession with him.

"What do you mean; speak up?" Posteur asked quickly.

"I managed to find out, sir, from other members of Grice's class, that one night he had bragged about being on intimate terms with one of the rulers of a petty dynasty in California. I took it upon myself, sir—as you know I have only a triple A rating—to track him down and find out what he knew, perhaps to route out this petty ruler. And," he added with a sharp, short blush to allay suspicion and instill trust, "I thought I might get that plus also."

Posteur rose and walked around the desk. He was a slim man, and though he looked as though he were sleeping, there was a wire tenseness in his manner. "Hmmm. That's very interesting. Do you know where Grice is now, Montoya?"

"No, sir. I was informed he was

here on TDY."

"Temporary duty to the Hi Guard," Posteur mused. He slapped his thigh with a palm. "I sent him out on a mission to the clan of Jukchu, to kill the father-chief. He's been gone for a month now, over his estimated time of return. I was starting to worry. Do you think there's a connection?"

Juanito leaped. "Perhaps, sir. I'd like to find out if I may."

Posteur looked at Juanito sharply. "That's all for now, Montoya. I'll call you later today."

"But, sir, I—"

"*That's it, Montoya.* Go back to your billets; I'll call when I want you."

Juanito left the room, worried, annoyed, and wondering if he might never live to be free of the assassin's corps. His room was quiet. And wired.

FOUR HOURS LATER, Posteur called for Juanito. His call brought Juanito up from the bunk with a start, for the voice was directly beside his head. The commanding officer had a subspace receiver hooked into the air of the assassin's room. "Come up here, Montoya."

Juanito sat up on the bed, his face warm with sweat. He had been in the middle of a darkly festering dream. There had been a formless creature stalking him through a

forest of eyes, and far off across what seemed to be an Argentinian plain, a great house with roses growing along one wall. It had held more, this dream, but the instant of wakefulness had dispersed it like morning mist.

He awoke sweating, and: "*Come up here, Montoya.*"

He stood up and leaned against the wall for an instant. Without stripping off the top of his skintite, he splashed water across his face from the tiny sink in one corner of the room, and went upstairs.

Posteur was waiting.

"I've decided to send you after Grice. There is something strange here, Montoya. I want you to understand that."

"I don't know what you mean, sir." Sleep and the dream were still swirling in Juanito's mind, and all he could think was that he was being sent after Grice. He was making progress.

Posteur stood up and perched on the edge of the desk, swinging his long leg idly. "I think you are lying to me, Montoya. I think Grice is not what you suggested. But I also know he has been gone longer than necessary, and you seem to want to find him as badly as I do. So I'm going to send you out." He reached for a small oilskin packet on the desk-top. "This is a flikmap of the route Grice took, and instructions as to the tactics

you should employ once you've found—"

"I have my own methods."

"—him. Look, Montoya, I know you've graduated, and you're a loner, but I still administer the punishment around here. So don't—"

"I have my own methods. Give me the map." He reached for the packet, and as though a lash of understanding had cracked between them, Posteur handed it to the dark-haired assassin. He knew Montoya wanted it, and that was enough, for Juanito was not in the good mood now.

"I'll bring him back," was all he said.

Later, he left the GHQ.

IT WAS COLD, and the village was warm. That was all he could think of for the moment. He lay on the ridge, his face pressed against the snow that was not really cold, not really warm, just there . . . palpable. He lay close to the ground, his legs spread, the feet flat to the earth, and he felt the numbness crawling through his vitals. It had been a long trek across the Alaskan wastes. The tundra had been hard-packed in some places, in others free-blown, and the ice bridges had crumbled as he had walked on them.

It had been a bitter cold experience, something they had not quite prepared him for at the

School. Had it not been for the incredible toughening at the School, he would surely have perished in the wastes. But the trail had been marked out luminously on the flik-map, and he had found the village of the Jukchu without trouble.

Now he lay there and watched the lights that moved about the village as the half-breeds carried their torches between the rude hutches. He could see why the Hi Guard had had little luck finding these people. The village was set down in a valley hollow that would be missed completely if the seeker passed a mere ten feet from the edge of the dropoff. Further, the hutches were covered with snow, and the half-breeds wore white furs, making them near-to-invisible against the landscape.

He could not tell what they were doing with the torches, nor why they were wandering back and forth between the hutches. They seemed to be remarkably stout, and many of them carried clubs in their other hands.

If this had been a regiment of Ruskie-Chink shock troops at one time, they had indeed fallen far. Juanito started belly-crawling down the slope. He was not certain precisely what it was he was after, though he knew his final goal was to be alone with Grice for a half hour. That was all . . . just thirty minutes.

The snow covered him as he half-burrowed down the face of the hill. He moved slowly but steadily, and little over an hour later had crawled the four hundred yards to the edge of the village area. There he paused, getting his bearings.

The Jukchus were now easily seen to be moving in a pattern. There was a line, swinging around most of the hutches in the village, that entered and left one slightly larger dwelling than the rest. The Jukchus drew their knives as they entered the front door, and licked them clean as they left by a side door. There was a great howling as they entered, and silence from within, and the great howling again as they left. The line moved quickly, and though there were perhaps a hundred Jukchus in the line, Juanito had seen several men enter at least twice. Whatever was going on within that hutch, it might be a partial solution to his finding Grice.

He began elbow-knee low-crawling toward the opposite side of the building from the doors through which the half-breeds entered and left.

The wind had risen out of the North, and swept down into the little valley with a sudden maniacal ferocity. Juanito turned the warming nozzle of his skintite up to 72, and felt grateful for the invisible heating elements in the me-

tallic fiber. He continued to crawl, and was pleased for a second by the great gusts of ribbony snow that blanketed him; his chances of being unobserved were enhanced greatly.

When he was no more than ten feet from the prancing, howling line of Jukchu warriors, Juanito angled in toward the building. It was a wooden structure, made by tying together many twigs and branches into bundles, and tying the bundles together to form walls. The walls were then covered with a black, tar-like substance probably brewed up in great pots, such as the ones Juanito had passed in his slow crawl. He managed to pass around the bulge of the building without being observed, and in a few moments was lying with his ear to the side of the building.

From within, at irregularly-spaced intervals, but usually no more than fifteen or twenty seconds apart—he timed them—he heard a swishing sound, as if air were being cleaved. Then, immediately following the swishing, a soft but distinct plop! This continued to happen, but other than the two unidentified sounds, the hutch was silent. Occasionally Juanito could hear the muffled footsteps of the men as they passed through, but even that did not serve to break the almost frightening silence of the hutch.

It was more chilling, that silence, than the cold that ate out of the North, and chewed at Juanito's body.

Juanito drew the palm-sized burner disc from his pouch and set it on the side of the hutch where it clung as though glued. He removed one of his heated skintite gloves—instantly feeling the full force of the frigid Alaskan weather—and using his fingernail quickly traced out the burn pattern on the flat surface of the disc.

It began burning immediately, and in a few seconds had penetrated the wall of the building, leaving a hole as large as Juanito's thumbnail. He removed the palm-sized disc, after negating its smaller burn-pattern, and shoved it back into the pouch. Then he put his eye up to the hole.

It was dim inside, but a brazier was flickering a spastic light across the walls and ceiling.

His search for Grice was ended.

Grice was inside. What was left of him.

JUANITO HAD SEEN some peculiar and terrible things in his years at the School. He had seen men crack from strain, and he had seen stereoplays of torture and death; he had witnessed and practiced many forms of pain-infliction; he had learned how to steel himself against the onslaught of many

enemies. But the Jukchus had their own, particular way of doing it.

For the first time since he could remember, he was ill. Deathly ill. Violently ill, against the snow and the side of the hutch. And when it had passed, his head swam with waves of nausea.

He lay there, his face pressed to the clean snow on the other side of him, for the first time in his life lost in fear and fascination of death.

He took some snow in his mouth, and more on his feverish forehead. Then he slumped against the side of the hutch and allowed his eyes to close. In the center of this enemy village, with the remnants of a Ruskie-Chink horror battalion on every side, he slid into reverie.

He had to do it. Madness lay waiting a second away.

After a while, he was able to look through the hole again. He had been wrong; Grice was not alone. There were four others there, and from what little was left of their clothing, he could see they had been members of the Hi-Guard, probably sent out to scout for the village and captured by the Jukchus.

The half-breeds were slicing them up.

It was a peculiar execution, for execution it had to be. The men had been hung from the ceiling to almost floor-level, with ropes under their armpits and thighs. They were, in effect, in a cat's cradle.

Other bonds held them in place, and each warrior who came through used his scimitar-like longknife with skill and accuracy. It was not a question of killing, but rather of maintaining life as long as possible.

The Jukchus were a resourceful band, and skilled in this form of death, for one of the men still hanging—like so much beef on a hook—was without legs or arms, half his torso sliced away, and his entrails dangling. Yet he lived.

They all lived.

Grice lived.

His feet severed from his body, and the ropes under his armpits were held up by strips of cloth tied to the loops. For he had no arms.

The prisoners uttered not a sound; it was apparent they had been drugged somehow. Then, as Juanito stared through the burnhole in the hutch's wall, he saw Grice's eyelids flicker and he knew the man was not drugged after all. It was more a case of shock, insensitivity at the nerve-ends, at this stage of dismemberment. But Grice *was* alive!

And Juanito had no way of getting to him.

Even as the assassin watched, warriors passed before him, making their terrible movements on the five things that had once been men, hanging from the hutch's ceiling.

A lean, yellow-weathered Jukchu

took a stance, swung his long-knife around his head as though it were a cat by its tail, and sliced a chunk of flesh from the body on the end of the line. The swish and plop sounds came to Juanito, and he knew he must act quickly. There was no telling how long this torture had been going on—from the looks of it, of the dried blood on the ground beneath each carcass, for quite some time. It was strictly chance that he had gotten here before Grice was completely cut to shreds.

The possibility of obtaining information from the man was even slight; but any further waiting would result in loss of the one link to the man in the N. Chicago Chambers. Juanito thought swiftly, clearly.

He had to get that sliced hulk out of there, and get it alone for a few moments. He had to make Grice talk. But would—or *could*—Grice talk? Was he lost in a world of shock and half-life? Juanito had to take the chance.

He crawled away from the hutch, toward the outer ring of light the torches threw. He saw one Jukchu warrior leaning against a gnarled, white stump of what had once been a hardy bush. The Jukchu was drinking from a leather flask-like bag, and wiping his frozen moustache with a gloved hand.

Juanito belly-crawled—just outside the half-breed's line of vision

—till he was directly behind the man. Then he got to one knee, drew his vibro-blade . . .

And in one fluid movement was swarming over the man, driving the shuddering whisper-thin death instrument into the Jukchu's neck. The blade severed the man's vocal cords at the instant before the blade pierced upwards into the brain. He died instantly, slumping back against Juanito.

THE ASSASSIN dragged the man into the shadows, and stripped him of his bulky, animal hide clothing. Then a sparing application of dirt and skin-tinctures from his pouch, the collodin scar to emulate that on the Jukchu's cheek, a bit of plastoid material in imitation of the moustache, and Juanito emerged from the shadows a few minutes later the perfect replica of the dead half-breed.

With little difficulty Juanito managed to get into the line of circling warriors. For an instant he thought he might have trouble, for one of the Jukchus did not care for the crowding, but Juanito mumbled a throaty nothing at the man, and brandished his own long-knife. The other fell back a step and placated the apparently-angered Juanito with mild blubberings.

Juanito paid no attention to the man thereafter, but advanced as the line advanced.

The group moved swiftly—for how long did it take to slash and lick clean a longknife?

In a few minutes he was at the open door of the rude hutch, and still his plan was not wholly formed. Juanito was relying on instinct and reflexes to carry him. And then he was inside. The hutch smelled terribly.

The odor of musky incense mingled darkly with the smell of dried blood, and worse, the smell of freshly-spilled blood. Juanito held his breath and then let it out slowly.

He saw a tall Jukchu with weathered yellow skin and a peaked miter standing beside the hanging horrors. After each warrior took his swing, the mitered Jukchu would apply a long stick with a slimy substance on it to the wound; he was caulking the blood off. That explained why the Hi Guards and Grice had not long since died of blood loss.

Juanito's longknife was at the ready, as the man before him took a cut from the cheek of the man beside Grice.

Then Juanito's reflexes were in the ascendant, and he knew the only way to get Grice away from here. The brazier that burned fitfully beside the yellow-skinned Jukchu. As gaily as possible, for such a happy occasion as this was to the Jukchus, he stepped forward.

Awkwardly. Clumsily. His shoulder caught the back of the man ahead, busy licking his longknife.

The man stumbled ahead, throwing Juanito—calculatedly—off-balance. Juanito went careening into the mitered Jukchu who threw him back in self-defense. Juanito went into the brazier, flailing it away from himself.

The fire caught in the straw on the floor, on the bound sheaves of wall-matter, on the sticky substance coating the wood bundles, on the Jukchu's clothing. In a second the inside of the hutch was an inferno.

Flames licked greedily up the bodies hung from the ceiling, and the last lights of life died in the tortured eyes of the slashed hulks. Flames bit at the air, and filled the hutch with smoke as the ceiling caught fire. A great blast of heat smashed at Juanito, and he leapt toward the swinging raw meat that was Grice. Even as he dodged forward—as the mitered Jukchu went screaming from the place, his hair and cape afire—the warrior behind him was shoving the line of men back.

"Out! Out!" Juanito kept shouting, and a guttural cry as urgent as his own was picked up by the others.

In an instant, in the time it took for a spider's leg to wither, Juanito had severed the ropes holding up the torso of the half-dead Grice.

He beat out the flames and threw himself—clutching the part-body to his chest like a baby—through the rear of the flaming hutch.

The snow was aflame with ruby shadows, dancing in a mad tune to the sounds of the Alaskan night. The wind roared down from the hills, and the snow swirled crazily, and a lunatic moon gibbered in the trees as Juanito beat back through the wilderness, away from the Jukchu village, carrying his terrible, terrible burden.

Grice had to live!

He *had* to name the man.

SOMEWHERE BACK in the whiteness, under a cliff, in a shallow defile that might someday become a cave, Grice died. But first he talked.

There was not much he *could* say, in his condition, but when Juanito laid the appendageless hulk on the snow, covered and swathed in animal hide clothing from the dead Jukchu, Grice's eyes flickered open. A part of his head was gone, and his hair had been burned off completely. Sooty marks coated his eyelids and forehead. Had he not been stout, there would have been less of him than Juanito had saved.

"M—" Grice managed to mouth, when he looked up at Juanito Montoya. His lips were bloody-caked, and cracked from no water.

His face twitched uncontrollably, and what might have been a smile on anyone else showed as a death's-head grin on his white, exhausted features.

"Hello, Grice," Juanito said in Speak.

Grice slowly—through an arc of less than an inch—nodded his head. His voice came from the black bottom of the sea as he replied in Speak. "H-hello, Montoya. Yuh-yuh—yoo f-found me, hah?"

Juanito acknowledged with a soft, mournful nod. Grice gave the terrible smile again. "You-y-you should h-have gotten h-h-here t . . ." he broke into a fit of shallow coughing and blood spattered against the snow, black and warm. His eyes closed and for a second Juanito thought he had lost the link to Eskalyo. Then Grice opened his eyes again and finished his sentence. "—t-two weeks 'go, fella . . . th-that's when they s-st-strung m-me up. Others'd been uh-uhp f-for a week buh-before I got there . . ."

"Try not to talk, Grice," Juanito soothed the dying shell. He wanted him to talk only one phrase, and did not want Grice to waste his breath on anything else.

"They caught you spying out the village, right?" Juanito asked. Grice nodded yes. "Some kind of a ceremony for captured enemies, was that it?" Again the affirmative nod.

"Grice, I got you out of there to ask you—"

Grice interrupted, and a flash of fire ran wild in his dying eyes. "Yoo, yuh-you got m-me out there so I'd tell y'how t-tur find—" a fit of coughing severed the words, but he plunged on through coughs and blood, "—th 'm-man in Noo Chii, in't th-that it, Montoy-y-a . . ." his shuddering added the question mark.

Juanito nodded solemnly. "I followed you half across AmericaState, Grice. It's important to me, more important to me than anything in the world, that I find Eskalyo. I—I found out he's my—my—"

He did not need to finish the sentence. Grice smiled an arrogant smile and said softly, in a whisper, "Your father."

Juanito's dark eyes opened wider. "How did you—"

Grice grimaced again. "I have you to thank for my being here, Montoya," he said, and there was no slightest trace of pain or halting in his voice. The clarity before death? Juanito hastened him to speak on.

"You don't th-think you fooled them at the School, do you, Montoya? No one gets his assignment changed just because he goes in to see a Probesman. They changed you because they wanted you to find me—and think you were doing something big and se-

cret. They planted *me*, Montoya! They took me out of classes and planted me at that Combats Meet.

"I'm not from Argentina . . . I'm from Oklahoma . . . but they wanted you to get interested in Eskalyo. They revived those memories of him, and wanted you to think you were outwitting the Seekers and the Probesmen and AmericaState and all of them; then when they made sure you found Eskalyo, they were going to have you kill him—whether you wanted to or not!"

His face was drained. There was only a scrap of life left to be eaten in him. How he managed to go on with such determination, Juanito could not understand.

"So you see, Montoya, you are the reason I'm here. If they hadn't wanted to get you to assassinate Eskalyo, and if it hadn't been imperative that you think you were on your own, I would have had a soft berth in Oklahoma . . . not cut to nothing out here . . ." and he began to cry.

"The name!" Juanito pleaded, not yet convinced of the truth of what Grice had said . . . for how could the School make him kill his father if he did not want to do it? He did not believe . . . but he had to know that name.

"Y-ysss," Grice tremuloed. "The man's n-name is Tedus Nur . . . he is head, huh-head executioner—fuh-field div . . . divishn . . . N.

Chicago Chambers . . .”

The portly assassin’s face started to pale toward milk-white. Juanito bent low and mumbled, “I—I’m sorry, Grice . . . I’m sorry this had to happen because of me—”

But Grice did not die then.

He managed to laugh once more.

A round, full laugh, that was edged with sorrow.

“D-don’t b-b-e sorry for muh-me, Mont-t—, don’t b-be sorry for m-me. I’m gettin’ away easy . . . I f-f-feel sorry for yooo . . . they got hell p-p-planned fo-for you, Monnnnn—”

Then he died.

Oddly enough, Juanito was afraid. There had been *such* a note of pity in Grice’s voice. Now why would he pity Juanito?

It was difficult digging the snow for a grave.

JUANITO BELIEVED. Had he not been able to escape the Hi Guard territory, had the sort of restrictions he had been led to believe AmericaState imposed to keep men in line, been imposed on him, to keep him from leaving Alaska, he might have thought Grice was delirious. Or lying. But there had been no difficulty escaping.

One dark night after he had returned to the Hi Guard GHQ and reported Grice’s death, the fate of the other missing Hi Guards and the destruction of the Jukchu chief-

tain—for that had been the mitered Jukchu in the hutch—he slipped out of the GHQ and found—

A jetcopter idling and ready for someone absent.

He took the opportunity, and stole the copter, not realizing till he was four thousand miles away, that the ship had been planted, and this was probably what the Seekers and AmericaState wanted. The realization came to him suddenly, shockingly, and he was quick to take remedial steps.

He crash-dived the jetcopter into the center of Lake Michigan.

His skintite was equipped to withstand the temperatures of Lake Michigan in the Fall, but it was not a substitute for a life-belt. He had to swim for it.

Just within the space of time left to Juanito to stroke, he was sighted by a ChiTroop cutter which bleeped in on him and scooped him from the water.

They did not question his story of having been jaunting in a private craft that had overturned. As they should have. As they would have . . . had not AmericaState wanted them to believe any story he gave them . . . had not AmericaState wanted him to get to Tedus Nur . . . had not AmericaState rigged the jetcopter to trackback its signals, so they would know where he was at any moment.

He knew, then, and the knowl-

edge did nothing to soothe him. All this effort, all these machinations, they were all at the notice of the AmericaState officials. He had had his memories of Eskalyo discovered when he had been initially probed, and the Probers had decided he, Juanito Montoya, would make a good decoy to find and assassinate Eskalyo, in Ciudad Rosario. Was Eskalyo becoming too much of a threat for the AmericaState system? Was there more to this than Juanito suspected? Undoubtedly! Yet they had pulled it off this far: they had aroused his interest in Eskalyo, then planted Grice to let Juanito know he was the petty ruler's son, then arranged it so Juanito would think it was his own idea to seek out Grice and the man in the Chambers, and Eskalyo himself. It had all been a plan, and he had gibbered and capered through it like the puppet they wished him to be.

He cursed himself silently, wishing he had never been found by the Seekers. He cursed the invisible, omnipotent Them who ruled the AmericaState, and for the first time since he could remember, he doubted the stately system; perhaps it was because he had been a child of freedom . . . perhaps it was because he had too much individuality to fully accept what he had been taught at the School . . . perhaps it was just that he was

sick of being shunted about. But at that moment of realization he knew the AmericaState way was not the best of all possible ways to rule the continent. The War had been a severe test, and the men who had come through it with the most strength left, had been the ones to establish the School and the Seekers and the Probers and all the other security checks and confining implementa of AmericaState government. But Juanito had never doubted that was the best way; the petty rulers had to go; they were a menace.

Was it so, however? Was that the way of it?

Now he doubted until his brain hurt. Now he knew the regimentation was no good, and the School was no good, and there was a fear in AmericaState—a fear of Eskalyo. Or if there were not . . . why would they be going to so much trouble to convince Juanito he wanted to seek out his father?

It had been chance, obviously, that Grice had been captured. Chance—he had been sent on a mission to keep him busy till Juanito arrived in Alaska—a harmless mission to keep him out of the way—and he had been captured—and tortured—and died with bitterness red on his lips.

That bitterness had compelled him to speak. To tell the truth about this business to the man he

was supposed to have duped.

So Juanito knew.

He knew he was being *driven* to find his father, and the America-State officials would give him all the help he needed. Such as an idling jetcopter . . . a ChiTroop cutter . . . or a free passage to Ciudad Rosario—wherever it might be.

Had not Grice been tortured in that way, had not his bitterness overcome his training, Juanito would have stumbled on, thinking he was escaping the assassin's corps, thinking he was going to his father, when all the while he would have been on his way to an assassination.

The ChiTroop cutter skimmed over the water of Lake Michigan, speeding toward N. Chicago, as the other thought struck Juanito Montoya:

How were they going to insure that he killed Eskalyo?

What hidden factors had they? Was he a tool without knowing it? He struggled with himself for a long instant, and finally scoffed it away; he had been trained to kill. That was probably the hold they had over him. They felt sure he would not go back on his training when the moment of assassination came. He chuckled in the sanctity of his mind. They were *so* wrong.

Unlike the many serfs and simple-souled draftees to the School, Juanito had been a creature of the

wind, free and on his own: he did not feel grateful for the training, and in an instant he would throw it over. When he reached Eskalyo—his father—he would pledge himself to allegiance no matter what the cost.

His assassin's training would come in handy.

But that was all in time. First he had to find Tedus Nur, head executioner, field division, N. Chicago Chambers.

TEDUS NUR was the most hideous creature ever spawned.

Not only his physical makeup—though that in itself was frightening, and perhaps reason for his other defects—but his tone of voice, the look in his eye, his gait, his attitude toward the political prisoners in the Chambers, everything. In everything, his body was reflected. In every word, every deed, every concept and inclination, his dwarf's body was mirrored.

Juanito Montoya instinctively slouched when he met Tedus Nur.

A man with a warped and twisted body such as Nur's, would be immediately antagonistic to a straight, tall youth with unscarred, clean limbs. Juanito sensed this, and lessened his own stature accordingly. If it had any effect on the dwarf, Nur did not let on.

He was despicable from the first moment of their meeting.

"What do you want?"

The thin, gashlike mouth opened to reveal less than half the teeth nature had intended. What few wined in a broth of saliva, were yellow and broken, save for two canines white and clean and deadly-looking, as if Nur were part animal—were-human—keeping those two teeth in good case for his animal stages. The mouth opened and a rank smell came forth. The eyes narrowed as the mouth opened, and the banked fires of hatred—an all-directional hatred, for everyone and everything—blazed more brightly from the thinned slits. Nur's eyes were bloodshot and stained about the iris with orange flecks. His eyes were any color. And any sick color. They were not brown, but mud. They were not black but dirt. They were not blue but the color of veins. Nor green but the color of mold.

The nose was a delicate, upturned sweetness, like a cherry thrust atop a pie of dung, or an innocent child lost in a colony of lechers, or a clean thought in the mind of a pervert. The nose was not of his face, but merely loaned from some other.

The head was pointed and nearly bald. It sat on a nearly nonexistent neck that ran into huge, massively-corded shoulders . . . segment of a twisted and evil form. Tedus Nur was a crippled dwarf

of the most objectionable sort.

"Dammit, I ask what you want? You gone answer?"

He swallowed his loathing of Tedus Nur and replied:

"I was in a private yacht that sank in the Lake. A—uh—friend of mine, John Grice? once told me if I ever had a problem, and was near New Chi, I should look you up, that you would—uh—help me out."

Nur's eyes narrowed still more, if that was possible, and his mouth slitted fine to a sharp reply. "No one is my friend, man. You got a name, you got papers, what you got I should know you come from Grice?"

Juanito swallowed hard. Tedus Nur could tell he was an assassin. Only an assassin wore the ebony skintite and pouch.

Yet he wanted Juanito to declare himself. "My name is Lland Jackh. I come from Oklahoma, near Grice's birthplace. Grice said you would help me find a—uh—certain person."

Tedus Nur grinned. It would have been more soothing had he snarled. He knew Juanito was lying. Juanito knew the dwarf was aware of his lie. It was part of the play-act. Juanito spoke with the lilt of the Spaniard, not with the twang of the Okie. He was obviously from the Argentine—and what did it matter where he ob-

viously was from, or what he obviously *was*, for Tedus Nur had had his instructions.

From the top.

It was his play, all the way.

"Come, man, I take you to my evening's work. I show you how I earn my living."

The dwarf rose off the many pil-lows piled on the floor of the office and capered toward the door. His wrinkled and crushed little body was all-evil and all-purpose as he took a blacksnake bullwhip from pegs near the door. Then he threw open the door—with its latch close to the floor—and bowed low.

"After you, Mr. Lland Jackh!"

Juanito moved out into the corridor, composed of softly-glowing green rock. Green rock that was the foundation of the Chambers. The New Chicago Torture Chambers, where political unfortunates were sent for confession and—in every case—execution. It was a huge tower in the center of N. Chi, surrounded by a force-mesh that went out for two blocks in any direction. Once a man was condemned to the Chambers, no one bothered to think of him again—he was dead. The tower rose one thousand three hundred feet into the New Chicago sky, the stone and not-stone of it glowing soft green by night and by day.

Beacon to those who sought the stern authority of AmericaState.

Bogey to children warned by

their mothers at bedtime.

Source of information from those who sought to overthrow the regimented, assassin-strong, Seeker-filled, Probesman-laden culture of AmericaState.

Cradle of terror.

Gray-halled, green-walled, silent and impregnable graveyard into which a man might disappear and never be seen again. Turned into the capable hands of executioners like Tedus Nur.

"Are you coming, Mr. Jackh?" the little dwarf trotted down the green-lit hallway.

Juanito's thoughts swirled back into his mind as water swirls quickly down a drain. "Uh, oh yes, yes of course, I'm coming."

~ He followed the dwarf, and wondered how long the play-act would continue. He hoped his end would not come here, between these walls.

From somewhere below, a scream skirled up to pierce his reverie.

TEDUS NUR ENJOYED his work. In his warped, single-line way, in his *own* way and in no way Juanito could imagine as sane, he was probably a top man in his field.

His field was cruelty.

Juanito followed the dwarf down a series of baffle corridors and area-ways, confusing in the extreme; a minotaur's maze of strange angles

and bewildering backtracks. This was another feature of the escape-proof Chambers.

Finally they came to a stairway, and the dwarf capered and caroled down it as though he were a child bent on a playday. Nur whistled and gibbered to himself like a thing gone mad, winding down and ever down that flight of fearful stairs. A rank and hideous odor came up from below, and though the green walls shone with equal brilliance at any distinct spot, there was a feeling of increasing darkness, of increasing dankness and depth as they descended.

The screams continued, sometimes rising, sometimes falling in pitch, but always there, always commanding and drawing them down down down into the bowels of the Chambers, and perhaps into the bowels of N. Chi itself. Juanito never knew.

When it seemed his legs would wear off at the knees, Juanito heard the little maniac—who had practically flown down the last hundred feet of steps till he was well ahead of the assassin—call a huzzah, and urge him on. He stumbled down the last steps, rounding a curve that brought him in sight of a great hall, with low benches in every direction, and a hundred green doors set in the wall. The doors were all of plasteel, it was obvious, even from that distance, and they were num-

bered from one to one hundred. From behind the doors, strange sounds could be heard, intermingling and mixing with the sounds from other doors. Down here the screams were not so terrifying, but worse, heart-rending.

The dwarf took up an heroic stance, hands on hips, bullwhip dangling, and legs apart, and smiled. He waved a hand about proudly. "Mr. Jackh! My office!"

The benches were black with dried blood.

"What is this hall?" Juanito asked.

"Waiting room," the dwarf answered simply, explaining no further. Yet the manner in which he spoke those two words was enough to send a tremor through Juanito's shoulders.

"Come with me, won't you?" the dwarf said, and it was by no means a request.

Juanito followed him, expecting anything, and expecting even treachery that would leave him imprisoned in one of these cells for the rest of his life. But he followed, for in the warped and twisted mind of this warped and twisted dwarf lay the answer to the puzzle: Where is Eskalyo? Where is my father?

Tedus Nur strode briskly forward, his eyes all fire and yearning, his hand tight to the mailed grip of the blacksnake bullwhip. It was just as they reached door number

76 that Juanito noticed something about the whip.

It was not simply a material construction. There were wire-tips protruding from the cat that ended the stalk. Wire tips that ran up through the stalk and into the handle. The handle was equipped with a series of studs that could be controlled from the fingertips.

As Juanito stared down at the whip, the dwarf turned and caught his eyes. "Interesting, eh? A little thing I had them send me from the SecuritySeek Research Labs in UpDakota. Guaranteed to make my job easier." He cracked the whip with authority, and sparks blazed a blue and gold arc over his head. Juanito drew back as a faint touch of that current stood his dark hair on end, and burned in his eyes.

If he had ever doubted it, now he knew for certain: the dwarf was criminally insane. A megalomaniac.

"You need a haircut," the dwarf observed, with no relation to anything else, and dismissing it, turned to palmlock open the door.

His prints were scanned and grooved and compared and okayed, and the door slid back in its trough. The cell within was large, but that did the prisoner no good.

She was bolted to the floor.

By her thighs, her biceps, her wrists, her waist, her feet and her neck. Auburn-haired, closed-eyed,

limp and filthy, no shred of clothing left on her body, the girl started at the sound of the whip in the air as Tedus Nur entered, and as though the cry were being torn from her stomach, she screamed for the heavens to take notice.

"Please, please," she whined, "please beat me! Beat me, but don't touch me, please, I'm crying, can't you see that, please, please . . ." her voice was thick with emotion, and her eyes filled with the sort of tears that were not affectation.

She wished for a beating from that hideous whip, more than the touch of the dwarf. What horrors had the man inflicted on her, Juanito wondered.

"You asked me to help you find a man, Mr. Jackh," the dwarf said, looking steadily at the girl.

"Yes."

"What is that man's name?"

"I—Eskalyo." The hesitation was momentary.

The dwarf turned then to Juanito, and his face was a plea for understanding. My God, thought Juanito, the little scum has emotions after all!

"Mr. Jackh, in my business, I'm told very little about matters of consequence, aboveground. I am told there is an important man on his way to me who will ask me about Eskalyo. I am told to give him all the help I can. I would not

show what I am about to show to you, to anyone, sir. But I long for recognition . . . my soul cries out for acclaim . . . so I show you my best work, sir, in hopes when you return to that position of importance your assassin's garb tells me you possess, you will drop the good words about poor Tedus Nur, in the darkness below New Chicago."

HIS FACE WAS BEAMING with supplication and a sort of beatific need the likes of which Juanito had never encountered. But the dwarf had said *something!* Something most important. He had said that Juanito was to be helped, and they had not told the dwarf that Juanito's mission was all the puppet work it had become. They had told no one, obviously, for in that way only could they keep it secret from Juanito. They had told Grice for he played a greater part in the conspiracy. And perhaps they had not even told him—perhaps he had spied out the information on his own.

But whatever the case, Juanito was now in the lap of the information he needed, and he was safe, completely safe, altogether in the driver's seat.

The dwarf had his instructions, and he had to carry them out. Now Juanito would learn where his father was to be found.

"What is it you wish to show me,

Nur?" a new tone of authority suffused Juanito's voice. "Will it lead me to Eskalyo?"

The dwarf's ridiculous head bobbed up and down on the spindly, nearly non-existent neck, and he chuckled to himself. He threw a flat palm toward the whimpering girl, chained to the floor, and said, "This girl will tell us, sir.

"I have had her in my Chambers for three months now, sir. She was sent to me from Ciudad Rosario—I'm sure they have told you about Ciudad Rosario. A petty monarchy somewhere in Argentina. She is one of the household maids or something there, we have never been quite able to find out what her position was. She was found in the town of Corientes," he mouthed and mispronounced the name fearfully, "that's on the Argentine-Paraguay border—"

"I know where it is, Nur," Juanito interrupted. "Well, what has she said, if she is from Eskalyo's duchy?"

The dwarf looked frightened then, and sheepish.

"N-nothing, Mr. Jackh."

Juanito seized his opportunity. "Nothing?"

The dwarf nodded dumbly, frightened at the authority in Juanito's tones.

"A good word, is it? A good word with my superiors, is that what you want, you slug!" He

saw the dwarf's face darken, as he cringed down and back in a confusion of anger and fear. "I'll give you many words. But none good. What manner of inefficiency is that? You've had a woman here for three months—" the period three months rang true; that was just about the time Juanito had asked for transfer to the Hi Guard, "—and she has not yet divulged her information. You are to be congratulated, Tedus Nur, really congrat—"

The little dwarf sprang forward then. But not at Juanito. He ripped a fearful cry from his chest and threw himself at the girl. In a moment he was over her, the black-snake bullwhip ripping the air, the sparks splattering out against the green, glowing walls. Then the whip arced down and struck her naked flesh, and the scream was a small, stifled thing, all the more terrible for its heaviness and sharpness and shortness.

Even as Juanito started forward, the dwarf struck again and a third time, so quickly Juanito barely saw the movement of the heavily corded arms. Where the lash dug in, great wide stripes of blue-black welts erupted, and blood surged up into the troughs like water in a pod.

Juanito caught the dwarf's arm as the third blow landed, and he ripped the bullwhip from his hands, lifting the little maniac and throw-

ing him bodily against the wall.

Tedus Nur struck the wall and fell on his face. The girl cried no longer; she was unconscious, her hands doubled into futile little fists.

Juanito took the whip in his left hand, and saved his right hand for the dwarf. He was intent on beating the executioner as he had beaten the girl, but sanity returned quickly, and the assassin's sharp mind stopped him.

"Fool!" he snapped at Tedus Nur, who was shaking his head in confusion and pain. "Would you kill the one person who can lead me to the man I seek? America-State needs her alive . . . more than you need her pain! Get out of here!"

The dwarf stood up shakily, clinging to the wall which would not support him. He fell again, and still enflamed with rage at the dwarf's treatment of the girl, Juanito stepped to the little man and dragged him bodily to his feet. Juanito thrust the shank of the whip into the dwarf's hand, and propelled him from the cell.

As an afterthought he called the executioner back. "Here! You, Nur. Give me your keys to these chains. I will try some of the methods of persuasion used at the School. They are less flamboyant, but I'm sure they will give me the answers I seek." He took the plate of lectro-keys offered subserviently by the

midget, and said, "Go to your office and wait for me." Then, "And have a jetcopter waiting, I may have to return to the School at once. Do you understand?"

The midget's face was drained of everything by the fear method. His eyes were lustreless and he nodded his grotesque head jerkily, like a child.

"And speak to no one about this, is that clear?"

Juanito jabbed a finger at the midget, and thrust him away without bothering to find out the answer. There could be only one answer. The midget was conditioned, as everyone in AmericaState was conditioned, to do what he was told by a superior representative of the AmericaState officialdom.

THE MIDGET WAS GONE, and Juanito turned to look at the girl. Yes, she was Ciudad Rosario. For somewhere along the conmingled gene-lines, one of Eskalyo's peoples had mated with the flame-haired folk of Ireland, and down those lines had come the opportunity, which had ended in this girl. Her eyes were the only part of her Juanito could not see, for they were closed, but even under the coating of filth and blood and deep cuts that swathed her young body, there was no question of her attractiveness. Perhaps not beautiful in the exotic sense of the word, but

fair in the traditional sense of fair. Lovely to behold . . . even in this pit of evil and death.

Juanito pledged silently to attend to Tedus Nur before he left the Chambers.

He crouched beside the girl, who was deeply lost in unconsciousness, and slowly began to unlock the chains that held her to the scummy floor. Rats ran for their holes at the sounds of the chains dropping away. A sound in the walls was the tap-tapping of another prisoner somewhere down the line.

The assassin lifted the girl's upper body into his arms, and slid her up against his chest. She was quite light; they had obviously been starving her, in addition to the torture—and whatever extra pleasures Tedus Nur had practiced on her. He swung her legs up, and carried her out of the cell, into the great waiting room.

The girl's auburn hair hung down in great waves, and her head was thrown back across Juanito's arm, so the arch of her neck was taut and smooth. He looked at her face, and it was a sweet face, despite what the last three months had done to her. Her body showed the signs of wasting; there were fleshy, fat-lines about her thighs and hips and waist where she had lost weight and the skin had left fat deposits. Yet her figure was still surprisingly feminine, and not too

thin to be called starved.

He laid her down on one of the great benches for which there seemed to be no purpose, and looked around for something to drape over her. There was nothing. The great hall was empty.

Juanito dug in the linings of his pouch and came up with a water spot. He took the tiny expansible plastic container in his hand, and rubbed his palms together rapidly; the water spot expanded with the friction, and combined its elements.

In a few minutes he had a plastic bag filled with pure water, that tasted lightly of chlorine.

He broke off the drink-tip, and inserted it between her lips. At first the water ran down her face and onto her breast, but then she began sipping lightly. In a moment she was hacking and choking strangely, and her eyes flew open.

Yes, they were green, as Juanito had supposed.

She looked at him, and said nothing. He brought the drink-tip to her lips again and she drank greedily. When she had had her fill, he drained the last of the water himself, and threw the bag away.

"Thank you," she said softly. There was a world of suffering in the words, and her eyes were frosted over.

Juanito nodded. He let his face assume an expression of sympathy and deep interest. What the in-

structor of expressions at the School had called "a look to generate confidence in the subject". It worked, of course.

Juanito had no interest in this girl whatsoever. She was merely another step to Eskalyo, and as such, he would play her for her worth, and then pass on. He was going to Ciudad Rosario if it killed every link in the chain; but he *was* going. That was the way of an assassin.

"If I carry you part of the way, do you think you could walk the rest, up those stairs?" he waved a hand at the huge staircase around the corner at the end of the great hall.

She looked at him warily. "Who are you?"

Juanito had to take a chance. "I'm Eskalyo's son," he replied levelly. "I was in the School for assassins when I was probed, and found out. I've been trying for a long time to get back to my father."

Her eyes had widened steadily as he spoke till now they were huge with incredulity. "You're lying," she breathed.

Juanito forged ahead. "Listen to me. What I say is truth, but whether you believe me or not, I don't care. I've killed men to get this far, and I'm not afraid to continue doing it. But I'm going to get to my father, if I have to

kill everyone in the world . . . everyone in this damned America-State. Do you understand me?"

She did not answer. More, she refused to answer; her silence was an electric thing; it defied words; it defied him, and in so doing—by mere silence—she infuriated him.

"Did the dwarf torture you?"

Again, silence. Then, slowly, an infinitesimal nod. A nod that embodied a great deal of strength despite horror.

"What he did was as nothing to what *I* will do to you, if you don't take me to my father." The words were soft as ashes, spaced as nails in flesh.

Her face drew down in a knot of determination; she was not going to reveal any more to Juanito than she had to Tedus Nur.

So Juanito did something to her.

IT BOTHERED HIM to have her break up that way, but when co-operation cannot be obtained through coercive means, the assassin is trained to bring it about through the next most direct. The case had called for insistence, and even a bit of callousness, and Juanito's training had responded promptly. When he had revived her the second time, she was prepared to believe anything he said; should he have assured her he was the Director of AmericaState, she would

have nodded and accepted him with a curtesy. But all he wanted was a direction to Eskalyo and Ciudad Rosario.

"You can't get there without me," she assured him, her spirit broken, but her position the same as before. "There are things about the route no one knows outside of the monarchy. And there are checkpoints. You'll have to take me back with you if you want to get there alive."

Juanito drew his vibro-blade from its slide-sheath and held it under her nose. Immature bravado rang in his voice as he snapped, "I've been looking for my father for a long time now. With this I'll get there. Don't order me around. Don't tell me what I have to do."

The girl sucked in breath raggedly, and she slumped her shoulders. "All right. All right." Weariness rose and fell like a tide in her voice. "If you don't believe me, then try and get there yourself. I'm willing to take you; you say you are who you are, and I'm too—too tired to argue, but I can't change it when I say that without me you won't get in."

Juanito considered. He recognized his own adolescence in threatening her so openly with the blade. He sheathed it again, and nodded his agreement. "All right. If you aren't lying I'll have to chance it. There's a copter waiting outside, I

hope. Just follow my lead, and pretend what I do is the way it is. Don't cross me or we'll both die."

The look in her eyes said she did not care if either of them died, but she would co-operate. Juanito felt a vague restlessness in his stomach; things were moving along, he was getting where he wanted to get—or was he?

"Let's go."

He helped her to her feet, and she refused when he offered to carry her. She walked ahead of him, across the hall and around the corner, then up the stairs. She carried herself proudly, though she was covered with filth and slime and despite the fact that she was completely without clothing. Her nudity did not seem to disturb her, and she held herself high, though the weariness and despair in her claimed that regal carriage as they climbed. Juanito was finally forced to carry her the last hundred feet of steps.

When they entered Nur's office, the girl was feigning unconsciousness.

Juanito snapped, "She has more information than I'm able to dredge up here. I'm taking her back to the School where I can use more advanced methods on her. Do you have the copter ready?"

Tedus Nur was smoking a cigar. It looked like a huge green protuberance, thrust from his gnome-

like face. He arched his thick eyebrows in amusement at Juanito's words. "Oh?" and "Is that so?" and "Oh, to be sure, to be sure, sir," he mumbled and gibed as Juanito spoke. His tones were ridicule, his movements insulting.

"Well! I want to take my prisoner, now," Juanito used the same tones of authority as before.

But this time Tedus Nur laughed. His laugh was compounded of gut-rumbling and spittle and the cigar bobbling up and down between his fleshy lips. "You smell bad, assassin. You smell very bad; you smell to me like an old fish! An old one, Mister Lland Jackh!" he mustered himself on his throne of pillows and burst into riotous laughter. "Smell bad, smell bad, you smell soOO bad to me. You don't even smell like what you're supposed to be, assassin!"

Juanito moved toward the door. The dwarf rose off his pillows. "Oh no!"

Somehow, the dwarf's mind had snapped. Despite his instructions from SecuritySeek, Tedus Nur had lost his senses, and was trying to stop the assassin from getting to Eskalyo.

Juanito whispered sharp words to the girl and she dropped from his arms as Juanito drew his vibro-blade. The blade sang in the air as the assassin threw it overhand. It imbedded itself in the dwarf's

throat, and carried him back against the fall with its impact. A fountain of blood gushed forth from the little man's throat and he had just a second to utter a sharp, pig-like squeal.

A second, before he died, open-eyed, and clutching his cigar. Then the curtains at the other side of the room parted, and Juanito found himself staring into the bell muzzle of a ten-thread disruptor, on a tripod mount, with three prison guards—ChiTroop guards—tending it. He had but a split-instant to glean the situation and understand what was going on:

Tedus Nur had lost his mind; he had stationed these guards to mow Juanito and the girl down if they tried to break away; but before the dwarf could give a signal to fire on the assassin and the girl, Juanito had slain him. Now the guards, hearing the shriek, had pulled back the covering and seen what had happened. In an instant they would open fire.

JUANITO THREW himself forward, even as the gunner depressed the automatic fire stud. Juanito prayed the girl was out of the line of fire as he assumed she was. He was in mid-air as the ten-thread bolt spread blue beneath his legs. He sailed over the muzzle of the deadly weapon and crashed into the three ChiTroopers. They were

bowled backward by the impact of his body, and the disruptor was knocked sidewise. Its blue beam crackled and spurted at the ceiling, burning a wide swath through plaster and paint and continuing to burn as Juanito struggled with the ChiTroopers.

The assassin caught the first man with a flat edge of closed hand across the bridge of the nose. The guard dropped with a sharp, convulsive yelp and lay quite still. His companions were busy extricating themselves from the tangle of arms and legs and disruptor tripod stems—and trying not to bring the weapon down on themselves at the same time—as Juanito barreled into them, still under drive from his leap. He brought two fingers into the eyes of one ChiTrooper, blinding the man instantly and sending him back against the alcove wall crying and clutching at the soggy pulps of empty sockets.

The third guard finally managed to get to his feet, just as Juanito rose to one knee. The ChiTrooper kicked out and his heavy boot sole clipped Juanito across the temple. The assassin tried to roll with the strike and managed to keep from fainting at the pain. His head felt as though it had been ripped away.

Faintly, he heard the sound of the office door closing as the girl left.

The ChiTrooper came back for

another full kick, and Juanito grabbed the booted foot as it swung past his ear. With a quick flip he turned the man's leg, and the guard stumbled backward. Juanito was on his feet in a moment and pummeling the man backward with vicious rights and lefts to the face and midsection. He caught the ChiTrooper across the right ear with a smashing right that sent the guard down in a heap. Juanito's foot caught him in the throat, and the man's head snapped back, as his eyes glazed over.

The next kick opened the guard's head.

Juanito did not stop to gasp for breath, nor to consider the pain that throbbed like a gong in his head. He stepped over the bodies and ripped the ten-thread disruptor from its tripod with a flick of the fastening bolts. As he burst into the hall, the disruptor still spewing blue destruction from its bell mouth—still ripping open walls and ceiling as it swung in his grip—he quickly took his bearings, remembering how the ChiTroops from the cutter had brought him to Tedus Nur's office when he had first entered the Chambers.

The landing deck was to the right and down a side corridor, then up a short flight of steps to the deck itself. He started running in that direction.

He met several ChiTroopers as

he ran; he did not turn off the disruptor. The beam burned through the guards and the walls behind them.

The landing deck was not empty. A jetcopter with the legend CHAMBERS PERS OFFICIAL was just swinging off to the right, rising as the wind rose, and heading toward the South.

Another copter sat empty and untended at the far edge of the deck, the same words written on it. Juanito burned down half a dozen crewmen and hangersmen who tried to intercept him, and in a few minutes was rising off the deck, tracking the other jetcopter on the sonorad. There was no opposition from ChiTroop copters in the area; his luck was holding; despite what he had done to Tedus Nur and his Chambers setup, they wanted him to get through to Eskalyo; they undoubtedly still thought he would try to assassinate the petty monarch. They did not know how wrong they were.

THE COPTER BEAT its way toward the south, keeping a clean distance behind the first machine. When they had passed over what had been the Rio Grande River, Juanito decided to board the first copter. He cut in the jets and soared after the girl. She caught sight of him apparently, on the sonorad, for the other ship abrupt-

ly dipped and tried to cut him off between two canyon walls. Juanito set the machine to autotrack and went back into the storage hold. There he found a fly-belt and propulsor unit which he strapped on carefully. Then he went back frontships, to see what positions the two ships held. They had gained on the mountains, and his ship had gained on hers. Apparently she was not as familiar with jet cut-in as she was with the standard copter controls; though there were few persons who did not know how to operate a jetcopter, it was apparent that the girl had been away from them for some time. Her handling of the ship was erratic, and she was doing a bad job of keeping herself hemmed off between the canyon walls.

Juanito knew she would never make it the full seven mile length between the high rock bluffs. If he was going to use her as his admission card to Ciudad Rosario, he had to get her, and get her now.

Sonorad was tracking the ship and at the same time estimating the length left to them between the canyon bluffs. The indicator said slightly less than seven miles, and they were jetting at a constant two thousand feet above the swollen Rio Grande. At least, Juanito was cruising at that set level, though the girl's copter was weaving and

dipping as though she were unable to stick tightly.

Juanito set the autotrack to gain, pace and hold and stepped to the cab lock. He palmed it open and caught a blast of wind and slipstream that tossed his dark hair about his eyes. He pulled the fly-belt's bonnet over his back and snapped it down around his forehead, and gripped the plastic molding at the edges of the lock.

The two copters drew closer, and once Juanito grabbed frantically for the inner wall as the ship dipped to falcon down on the leading copter. As the ship steadied, Juanito moved once more into the icy blast of the open lock. He could see the top of her auburn hair as the ship zeroed in, and then the copter was directly over the other . . . then slightly to the left of it, perhaps ten feet above.

Juanito leaped out and away and at the same time depressed the activator stud on the fly-belt and propulsor unit. The jets caught and he felt himself coasting. By lifting his elbows and dropping them, he was able to maneuver the unit, and he dropped steadily to the dark-black ship below.

Sonorad in the girl's ship picked him up when he was free of the overhead copter's image, and she tried to pull away. She applied her jets incorrectly and the copter started to drop. But Juanito was

in under the rotors and astride the cab by then. He scrambled for purchase and caught his balance only with the use of the still-firing propulsor unit. Then he wire-walked forward, till he was over the copter's cab lock.

It was double bolted from within, of course.

The wind whipped at him, and the slipstream, plus the added impetus of his flybelt threatened to rip him from the sleek surface of the copter. Only his grip on the cowering edge between cab and fuselage kept him anchored.

He reached with one hand to his pouch, and brought out the burn disc. Then, gripping it in his teeth, he crawled across the cab top till he was behind the girl, and over her head. He flattened himself to the plastoid, gripping as best he could, and plonked the disc against the plastoid itself. He set it for widest-burn, and watched as the hole spread out to a distance of three feet in circumference, with only thin struts of material left to hold the disc in place.

When the hole was burned—just as the girl looked up and saw him lying face down, looking in at her—he jabbed the disc off. He scooped it into his pouch, and standing erect, jumped at the three thin struts still blocking the hole.

They gave under his weight and he came crashing down into the

cab of the copter.

Then he snapped off his flybelt.

"That wasn't smart," he said to her.

Her face was a mask of despair.

"We're late," he said smartly.

"We'd better get moving. Get away from the console."

She rose slowly, wearily, and he sat down on the cot behind the control chair, to remove the propulsor unit from its bulky place on his back. When he had shrugged out of it, he took the control seat and cut in the jets properly. The copter above them continued to hang on, and Juanito suddenly thought he had a way of confusing the autotracking devices America-State had obviously put on him, so they would know where he was at any moment in his search for Ciudad Rosario.

They could not know there were two copters here now, for wherever the equipment was based, it was not that accurate for two shapes flying so close together. When they got down lower inside the canyon, the walls narrowed, and Juanito picked a crevice through which one ship might barely pass—but through which two was an impossibility.

He angled the ship through carefully, applying speed only at the last instant so the other copter's autotrack could not save it. The other ship crashed against the left

wall of the opening, and exploded out into the canyon.

That was for the benefit of AmericaState SecuritySeek.

He quickly set the copter down on a ledge three hundred feet down the crevice, and turned off the motors. Now there was *no* image

That was for the benefit of AmericaState had probably—unquestionably!—trained on him. The canyon walls absorbed the stray inevitable images his copter cast, and the explosion would lead the techs on the autotracking devices to believe that Juanito Montoya had cracked up in the canyon of the Rio Grande.

While they waited, Juanito talked to the girl.

"No!"

"Well, then, if you want that to happen to you, try to lose me or cross me or get me angry, just get me angry, and you'll find I'm not fooling; I want to find my father, girl, and I won't stop till I do. What's your name . . . I didn't bother to ask because I didn't think it was necessary, but now—"

He waited, and she looked up at him with surliness in her eyes. She was now clothed in a mechanic's zip-jumpup they had found in a locker backship. She sat now, with hands folded in her lap, and her face quite drawn with exhaustion and fear.

She did not answer.

"I've tried to tell you you have

nothing to fear from me," Juanito spoke softly, cajolingly, "but I'm desperate to find my father, and I'll let *nothing* stand in my way."

Three months of applied torture in Tedus Nur's N. Chi Chambers had not broken her, yet fifteen minutes with the assassin had convinced her he could make a rock speak, should he desire to do so. She feared him and mistrusted him—it was in her eyes, her expressions—and only his torture could make her speak.

Soon after she refused, though she cried and drew ragged breaths . . . she talked.

"My name is Elena Dymrna. I was with Don Eskalyo for fifteen years, since my father died. My father worked for Don Eskalyo, too. I was—uh—separated from a caravan that left Ciudad Rosario I—"

She went on, and told trivialities that did not interest Juanito, but when she came to the part of locating the petty monarchy, she cut off quickly. But Juanito did not press it; she would take him there.

He "persuaded" her to give him starting directions, and three hours after the explosion of the first copter, they took off again.

They passed over the Isthmus of Panama two hours later.

THEY HAD FLOWN out over the Gulf of Panama, and head-

ed straightaway toward the western bulge of the continent, the auto-track's primary co-ordinates Latitude 5°S, Longitude 80° 4 minutes W. They passed over Paita four hours later on jet and rotor drive.

That night the Tropic of Capricorn was left behind, and still they were heading South, toward Santa Clara Island, the great dark expanse of the Pacific chopping and heaving far below.

They did not cross land again.

When they were past the last jutting land area, where Aruacc lay sleeping in the early afternoon sun, Juanito half-suspected the truth. Ciudad Rosario was not on land. An island perhaps, or—

The latter thought was fantastic. He put it from his mind.

But it came back in strength when they turned west on the forty-first meridian. Latitude 41°8'7" South and Longitude 85° West was empty ocean, the Pacific cold and deep.

"Here," she said, and closed her eyes.

Juanito did not doubt her. She could not have been lying so effectively. "Elena, where is my father?"

Her eyes grew defiant, and Juanito could see in them a resignation to death; she was sure he would kill her when she spoke. But her chin came up, and through the filth on her face, she smiled softly

—perhaps the first smile in over three months.

"Where is your father?" the smile deepened, and there was a subtle mocking twist to it. "Over sixteen hundred fathoms below the water."

Then it struck Juanito Montoya fully, why AmericaState had been unable to locate the petty monarchy of Ciudad Rosario. It was somehow located beneath the waves. A country under the sea. In the deep, black waters of the Pacific the biggest threat to AmericaState rule lay quietly hidden, even as the School lay hidden in the mountains.

"How do we get there?" Juanito asked.

"You really want to find him, don't you?" she asked. "Even though he'll probably have you killed at once."

"Why should he do that?"

"You're an assassin. Anyone can see that from your dress, your—" her words faltered as she thought of his ways of inducing speech, "—actions, the way you talk. If I don't trust you, why should Eskalyo?"

"He will trust me. He will know me."

She snorted ruefully.

"I am his son."

"He has no son. I know."

Juanito, for the first time since he had entered the School, felt complete and absolute anger wash-

ing him. His sensitive mouth drew up in a snarl, and he said, "What do you know? Do you know what it is to know how to kill, and nothing more? Do you know what life can be like on the Pampas with no food, and little shelter, and the cold coming down? You know!" his half-laugh was all bitterness and fury. "Can you know what it is to live like a hunted thing, and when you are found, what it is like to be taught how to murder men in the neatest most rapid manner?"

"I—"

He cut her off. "You know! You know nothing, girl. But I tell you this, and you know enough now to not doubt me. I *will* find my father. And if I don't—" he drew a spare vibro-blade from his pouch, and tested the edge with a finger. It sang darkly in his hand.

"But I *will* find him. Now . . . how do I get in to Ciudad Rosario . . . is there a land entrance?"

She smiled softly. Determined to keep whatever secret she might have. "Try the island of Juan Fernandez . . . mas a tierra."

"I didn't ask where I might try, I asked if there was a land entrance there. Is that the place?"

"No."

"Is there a place?"

"No."

"How do I get down to it?"

She laughed at him then.

And she would not stop laugh-

ing, even when he laid hands on her. The laugh was not hysterical, nor was it even taunting; it was merely satisfied. Completely, wonderfully satisfactorily satisfied.

He tried to get her to stop. The School way. After a while she did. Then he asked her again.

"How do I get down there?"

"Why, you dive, assassin, that's the only way."

And she laughed again, renewed humor in what she had said. Sixteen hundred fathoms. No chance. Pressure. The creatures that lived in that deep. The darkness. The water and the suffocation. Then he felt everything slipping away; his mind groped futilely for the School solution.

There was none.

DAY HAD COME and gone. The evening had set in, and Juanito had fed both himself and Elena from the meager copter stores in the tiny kitchenette backship. But still no solution came to him. There was something wrong here. It was apparent he was now fighting a different enemy. He had escaped AmericaState—at least temporarily—and though he still wondered what weapon they would employ to force him to assassinate his own father, he knew he had a new adversary.

Eskalyo. Don Eskalyo, and the men of Ciudad Rosario. For un-

til they knew who he was, and were willing to accept him, they would try to destroy him. If they found out about him. If they knew he wanted in.

Juanito had a feeling Elena Dymyna knew something he did not. Something important. Something like Eskalyo's knowing they were there, and that Juanito was coming down. For he had already decided. If diving was the only way to get down, then dive he would.

Again, he had a feeling. The feeling he would not have to attempt a sixteen hundred fathom dive. They would find *him*. That was what he knew.

So he tied her in the locker back-ship, and took the copter down to fifteen feet above the chopping aqua surface of the Pacific. It was dark in there. Dark and hidden, the fine place if a man wanted to hide a petty monarchy.

Ciudad Rosario? Yes, he imagined that was it.

He turned his skintite's heat control higher than even it had been in Alaska. Then he unpalmed the lock, and threw down the ladder. It plopped onto the water with a smacking sound, and floated there, rising and falling in rhythm to the beat of the waves.

Then he rose high on his toes, thrust forward with all the power of his legs, and dove cleanly for

the ocean.

He struck true and slid down without effort or sensation of having hit water. In a few moments the water had closed over him so completely that the darkness of blindness enveloped him.

It was colder than he had imagined. Colder than the grave, and he felt the wish come up from the pit of his stomach that if Eskalyo patrolled these waters—as Elena's attitude led him to suspect—the patrol would find him quickly. He went down.

The layers of darkness came up to meet him, and, like veils of thinness in the mist, parted only to be replaced by more and thicker veils.

His breath was short now. He reversed his kick, and shot toward the surface. The skintite was keeping the worst of the cold from him, but he had no gloves and the skintite's cowl could only keep off so much chill from his head and face. He broke surface like a dolphin, splashed twice to allow his lungs time for filling, and surface dove under.

He continued diving for three hours, then climbed the ladder to rest.

It was a short rest, and though when he lay down on the contour-couch his eyes closed instantly, the time sense in his mind brought him to full and sharp wakefulness a

mere hour and twenty minutes later.

He took the deep dive again.

It was approaching evening. What little warmth the air had held, now was gone when he surfaced. However, the water was a few degrees warmer. The darkness was now not only below, but above, and when he surfaced his mind found no release from the nightmare world beneath the waves; he was forced to live on in it, both with air and without. Once, he thought he had already broken the surface, and let his breath out. The water rushed into his lungs, and he came to the top choking, gasping, visions of tarantulas in his eyes.

Then, after the second three-hour diving period, and the short rest, his search came to an end. He had not found Don Eskalyo.

But Eskalyo found him.

THEY CAME UP from below, a blue aura surrounding them. Three of them. Muscled even through the plasteel-cloth suits to such an extent that Juanito could see the ripple and surge of their bodies clearly. They wore flippers on their feet and soft bubble-like helmets covered their heads. Power-paks were strapped to their backs, and each one carried a spear-gun of a design Juanito had never encountered in the Armaments Classes at the School. He could see their

faces through the bubbles, for the blue glow that surrounded them cast light out into the surrounding darkness. Their hands were covered by insulated gloves with spike-tips at the finger ends. The breather apparatus, attached to the power-pak, sent out streamers of bubbles behind them as they shot up from under Juanito's feet. They came on like sharks, and circled him warily.

This was their element.

From moment to moment their heads inclined at different angles, their feet turned in and out, their legs were crossed and opened and moved rhythmically, their spike-tipped hands waved almost in ballet femininity. They were speaking to one another; signalling to each other; planning underwater strategy; their movements were their semaphore.

And they came around and around, circling like the sharks they so resembled in their black suits.

Juanito's lungs cried for air.

With a reverse scissor, Juanito flailed backward out of their decreasing circle, and he sent himself up toward the surface. Their element? It was, and he had no choice but to get them into *his* area, if he expected to see Eskalyo, and not be drowned out here.

He struggled toward the surface, and even as he saw the plastoid of the ladder floating above him,

lying on the watertop, a shzzzzz sounded behind him and one of the spears spewed past, trailing its stream of bubbles and the thin wire cord that would be re-wound to reel in the missile.

He arched forward, kicking frantically, and made the surface an instant before the three patrolling guards shot up around him. In an instant he was up the ladder, and scrambling for the cab of the copter.

They floated below him, blue fog in the darkness, for a handful of seconds, then there were three distinct splashes, and they were gone, back to wherever they had come from.

Juanito pulled himself over the sill of the lock, and went to the small stack of towels he had prepared for his returns from diving; they were not precisely towels, nor even roughly so. They were wiper clothettes, used to sop extra lubricant from the rotors and jet tubes. But they were thick, and served the purpose more than well enough.

He dried himself carefully, set the skintite's dryer to quick-dry, and pulled the cowl from his head. Then he sat down to think.

He heard her kicking in the locker, and remembered it had been a good nine hours since she had eaten. It didn't matter; he made no move to release her.

Thoughts tumbled in all about

Juanito Montoya. There were several things he knew now:

First, Eskalyo was somewhere below, in a city beneath the ocean. But sixteen hundred fathoms was not three hundred fathoms, and if men had come up from down there, on patrol, they must have had some way of equalizing the pressure.

Second, if such a system of equalizers existed, as they must, he could not logically expect to use that system without being discovered.

Third, if they knew he was here—sonorad more than likely—and had sent men up to find out who it was diving so suspiciously above their city, they must be concerned about being discovered.

Fourth, if that were the case, then they would have more adequate defenses set up below. He could not expect to get through those defenses alive.

There was a fifth, but the fifth was a blank.

The solution lay in joining, not fighting. He had to get one of those suit-and-bubble affairs, and go with a patrol, back to the deeps. He had to capture a deepsman. And that was not an easy idea to assimilate.

They remained in the water, and could disappear at a moment's notice, merely by submerging. Then too, they had the spear-guns.

Yet . . .

He had School training. What would the Subterfuge instructor have recommended? Juanito pondered long, and to no avail. His eyes lit on the hump of the plastoid ladder, hanging over the edge of the lock.

A picture formed in his mind. He congratulated himself; it was a complete picture, a brilliant picture, it solved the problem neatly. In a short time, he knew he would be before his father.

If nothing went wrong.

WHEN THE NEXT patrol came up, six hours later, they hung close under the surface and watched the bobbing movement of the ladder above them. Finally, one of them swam off to the North, and surfaced. He was behind the copter, but he could see the ladder hanging down clearly.

The man they had come after was hanging from the ladder.

He was upside-down, his foot tangled in the cording of the ladder, held rigidly in place while one leg flopped over free, and his arms hung down the length of the ladder, almost to the water line. He was three-quarters of the way down the ladder, and strangely, he looked . . . dead.

The deepsman sank beneath the waves and swam quickly to his companions.

A flick of his hand: *he seems*

to be dead.

An inclination of the head: *what are you talking about?*

A swirling of arm about body: *he's hanging upside-down from the ladder, and there's a knife wound in his throat. I could see it from where I was.*

Much movement. *Let's see.*

They broke to the top, and looked above them. The man from the copter was certainly dead. He was hanging there, blood pulsing down his throat, staining the front of his dark skintite even darker. His arms hung loose, and his entire body swayed with the random movement of the ladder. His leg hung off the side, flopped back, and the tangled leg had been caught only by chance. That was apparent from the look of the entanglement. Somehow, or someone, had slashed the man's throat.

"I'm going up," the first deepsman, the one who had first gone up to observe, said. Now that they were free of the water, they spoke aloud. The other two nodded. "Cover me," he said sharply.

They wagged their spear-guns at him.

He slung his own spear-gun over his shoulder and grabbed for a rung of the ladder. He started to climb hand over hand, warily watching the copter for other occupants. The man on the ladder was not quite dead, he could see

that from here. But not long before dead, for the blood still flowed . . . yet slowly . . . pulsing as though he were unconscious.

The deepsman was halfway up the ladder then, and staring beyond the man on the ladder. No danger there, but he might have friends. His two partners below, watched carefully, speaking to each other softly. They both knew their spear-guns were not accurate in air.

The deepsman was starting to climb past the dying man up there, ready to search the copter . . .

The man was not dead!

As the deepsman climbed over him, he arched his back rigidly, came up, grabbed the ladder below the deepsman's feet with one hand, and from the palm of the other hand—concealed till now—a vibro-blade slid into view. The man on the ladder drove the blade into the spine of the deepsman, and the bubble-headed man screamed shrilly, collapsing, and nearly tumbling free of the ladder.

As the two other patrollers watched, unable to fire for a second, so shocked by the suddenness of what had transpired, the man on the ladder rose full length, and grabbed the now-dead deepsman as he fell past. The copter shivered as the weight thumped across the other man's arm, and then they were steadied.

The two deepsmen below yelled

their vengeance, and fired almost simultaneously. The bolts shussssed past the climbing man as he hauled his burden up into the copter.

Then, helpless to prevent it, he dumped the body into the lock, and the copter flailed away into the sky . . . while they watched. They pressed the reel-in studs on their weapons, and the bolts came slewing through the water, back to lock position in the muzzles of the spear-guns.

The deepsmen looked at each other for a long moment, and one of them said, in thick Spanish, "He was a good fellow."

The other did not reply.

They both submerged.

The Pacific was cold and dark and actively still.

While above, things were happening.

THE COPTER SWIRLED down from the low-scudding clouds and dropped toward the water. Juanito Montoya was now clad in a shark-black suit, breather apparatus, a propellant unit and head bubble. His spear-gun was loaded and cocked. He waited.

As the copter settled, the sun's rays began to cross with great trepidation the broken, pyramided surface of the ocean. Soft sounds came from the water, were met by the shrill and harsh sounds of the ship's rotors, jets, creakings, and

were frightened into background persistence.

The ship settled to within ten feet of the Pacific, and a black shape exploded from the lock. The shape arched out over the deep azure sea, and then struck hard, in an instant—gone.

Juanito Montoya dove, and dove, and clove the water with one purpose. There was no sense to it, he could see that now: there was a darkness in his eyes and forcing all matter in his brain to the sides, hiding, crouching from the darkness that had unbidden come timidly at first then with the bravado of the conqueror to live in his skull. Why Eskalyo? To what end? Freedom? He did not believe in it for the people of AmericaState any more than the Seekers or the Probesmen or any of the others did; it was a hard world godammit, and there was no quarter to even ask or get, because it just did not exist!

So strike.

Strike up and slash deep!

So why seek out Eskalyo?

No reason. But he was diving. He was going. The drive was there and he would do it. The Pampas had been so sweet, so fine, so quiet sometimes. Diving!

What would he say? Could he? Inside the bubble, he was crying. Stop it! God damn your stinking tears, *Stop! Cry . . .*

A school of some vague fish hurled past in the darkness just beyond his blue glow. In the copter, a naked man lay on the deck, hardly any blood at all dried on him. There had been an even, straight slit cut in the tight diving suit, below the ribs, just at the right side of the spinal column. Juanito had mended it carefully.

It was cold down there and dark.

That was the worst.

Not the great lumbering something that bore over him, causing him to fight the current as it swam by, leaving him with a nameless dread of that great thing . . . not that . . . not the sharp-toothed things that lived and fasted then feasted then whirled back to the deeps for darker thoughts . . . not that . . . and not even the schools and groups and herds and crowds and couples that went by him, going up, coming down, detouring past as his blue lantern winked down and down and down toward Ciudad Rosario.

There was a surging oneness to it all now. A lightheaded allness and a—what?—a nessness that told nothing, yet spoke the secrets of the music of the bottomless eternity that was all his, now his, his alone, in his heart so sweet for the first time in his life *I'm coming fathert!* of him and all of it.

Oh, stop it!

There was one world for him.

A world of death at the helm, and life and goodness and hatred and dependence and violence as its crew members, with hope its supercargo, dame Hope, all in white and sparkling with the colors of the universe so sweet like the taste of guava jelly and tiny blades of clear mint in the mouth when it was fresh in the day. All that Dame Hope, you offer, and I spit on your beautiful face so the froth runs down your chin, because you don't know can't know could never ever not *ever* know that you are riding death's ship, like the Flying Dutchman, doomed forever so God don't even pity you, doomed to ride that ship till it turns to dust motes and goes away.

So that—

He saw the first of the pressurizing units.

It was a bubble, all steel, and impregnable.

He knew he could not get in. They would have guards, they would have defenses. He had to go on down. He turned on his back and paddled away, then down again. The pressure might crush him, but he was banking they had set up the system not only to handle the equalizing problem, but to do it within the limits of the men's comfort. In an emergency, he might be able to make the next one down. This was an emergency.

He stopped thinking, for think-

ing could only make it worse. He had killed too often, thought too many bad things. He did not want to cry again. That was the bad thing, to cry.

He dove, and thought no more. It was a long time.

A long time.

IT WAS A BLOODY descent. The guards were not so alert in the lower pressurizing spheres. They had been lulled by the security of a sphere above them, reasoning that a man could not dive as deep as the next spheres, and so *must* stop at the sphere above. They were wrong.

Down he went, and long stretched into the unending gloom of the deep. The blue aura flickered and shone around him, not so much as a headlight in the darkness, but as a deterrent to those roamers of the ocean who ate what swam.

A bloody descent, for three men died in that second sphere, and three in the third sphere, and two in the fourth. Nine men of Eskalyo had already died, so Juanito could find his father.

Was it worth it? He didn't know, but the drive was in him and he had to go down and down and down to see Eskalyo. And he knew how to kill; he had been taught well at the School. It was all he knew, so he did it without thought or compunction. The remorse was

a strange, gnarled thing, altered in shape, and was not remorse by the time he felt it. But in its way and in its form, it was there.

Finally, when he thought surely he could go no deeper, it rose out of the ooze and slime of the bottom, surrounded by reefs of coral and miles-high trees of sea-growth. It was a pink glow at first. A halo coruscating in the depths, thrust up between the jaws of a subsea canyon. Thurst up and pulsing, like some cosmic lightning. As he swam down, stroking strongly now that the goal was almost in sight, the city rose up out of the canyon to his sight. It was a dome, sunk down on a plateau inside the subsea canyon. It was perhaps twenty-five miles in circumference, and the dome rose up a good five miles in its arch. It was huge and impressive, and totally pink with a light all its own. He could see why they had named it what they had named it.

Ciudad Rosario.

The patrol shot up to meet him. Ten of them. They had their spear-guns drawn, and there would be no chance to talk them out of what they had in mind. Juanito struggled backward and lodged himself in between two shafts of coral, sighting aim on the leader of the oncoming group. The muzzle of his own spear-gun was thrust through a break in the coral, and as the

deepsmen's face grew clear inside the bubble helmet, Juanito depressed the firing stud. A muffled report and the bolt shussssshed away at lightning speed, trailing bubbles and its cord.

The spear took the man high in the chest and bowled him backwards, carrying him over and feet over and over, till finally he hung there, limp in the water, his blood spreading out in a dark cloud around him. Juanito stabbed at the rewind stud and the loosening mechanism on the spear tip shot the bolt free of the dead flesh. The bolt returned in a twinkling; and though the nine remaining members of the patrol team had scattered, Juanito set the spear back to full power and waited.

They dropped down from atop. He had somehow forgotten for an instant that this was not free air, but the carnal ocean, and they came down from above, and grabbed him.

He struggled with them, but they were in their element, and it was not hard for their rippling muscles to command his. He wrenched free suddenly and tried to break out from between the coral shafts.

Then one of the deepsmen raised a thin tube of metal, aimed it and a bolt of deep azure substance struck Juanito Montoya. The assassin felt the power of it wash him and his body was limp as seaweed. The hurt was growing though, and

then—abruptly—it was gone . . .

Everything was gone . . .

He slid off into a dark, darker than the darkness of the sea.

HE WAS WALKING on a spongy road that sucked and plopped and made vile noises with its million mouths. It was a grey road, and it wound downward toward a bog that sucked and plopped and made even more vile noises with its million mouths. His feet were caught in the stuff, and he could walk only with an extreme effort. His hands were free, and he wielded a long knife of heroic proportions that was dripping rain-bow-shaded blood. His mouth was covered with tape. All around him were screams.

He—

—awoke!

"Who are you?" The man before him was tall, with a tight, urgent competence to his body, though it was apparent the man was past the prime of life. At least sixty, perhaps older, with a fine downy white goatee that came from his chin with no apologies and no hesitation. His eyes were dark black and though silver dodged through his hair, still the black mat of it was high enough to be combed without white streaks. His nose was quiline and had been broken once, and set poorly. His hands were delicate yet reminded Juanito of Thirteen, from

his class in the School; Thirteen, whose hands were strangler's hands. These hands were veined, but not quite killing hands. They were—what?—*doing* hands perhaps. Yes, that was it; they were hands that accomplished.

"My son." The man spoke the words so softly, so simply, they told Juanito many things. This was his father, this was Don Eskalyo. Somehow, his father had found out who he was.

"How . . ."

"Probing," Eskalyo admitted, and shook his head in an indefinite little movement. "We learned it all. All of it."

"I've come a long way, father," and there was no weariness now, and neither—surprisingly to Juanito—was there a lack of emotion, affection. He felt warmth for this man. For the first time in his life, with the exception of Jock—Thirteen—he felt a kinship, a nearness to someone. Juanito Montoya had come home.

"They sent me out to kill you," Juanito said, unnecessarily.

Eskalyo's face held a strange expression. Not fear. Not hatred. Not determination. More, a soft-edged resignedness. What was to be, was to be. It was not a good expression.

"Yes, I know all that. They know they cannot defeat me. They know we have something on our side that means their end . . ."

Juanito nodded. "I know what it is, I found it also. I saw what AmericaState has become. A tyranny. I saw it in New Chicago, and in Alaska, and—"

"—and what they have made of you. Yes, all of that, my son." Eskalyo drew a deep breath.

He went on. "The AmericaState is seething; it won't be too long now, when everything will explode like the volcanos around us, here at the bottom of the sea. We know that, and *they* know it, and they fear me. I have contacted the petty monarchies all across the continent, and they are ready, ready to strike when the day is right."

Juanito listened, thrilled for the first time in his life. He had run and hidden and killed, and now he was part of a cause, something to work for and hope for and pray for. It was good.

"You came with Elena," Eskalyo said in clipped accents.

Juanito nodded. "She is locked in a locker in the copter."

"She is your half-sister," Eskalyo said. Then, when the shock had worn away slightly, and Juanito thought of how he had treated her, how he had forced her to lead him here—for it was the only way he knew to deal with people—he could not speak.

"I want to join you, father," Juanito hurriedly said, when the mist in his mind had cleared. "I

wish to fight with you. I've been trained. I can fight and I can kill. I can—"

Juanito stopped abruptly. Eskalyo was shaking his head. "No, Juanito, you cannot join me."

"But—but—why?"

"A culture produces certain kinds of men. Those men are products and it is not their fault they have been ruined and altered and corrupted. But they are part of that culture, and any culture that takes them in runs the risk of the original sin all over again."

"I don't . . . know what—what you mean . . ." Juanito stammered.

Eskalyo did not have a chance to continue.

The weapon AmericaState was prepared to use, so the assassin would kill his father, came into being. How it had been planted, how it had been concealed in Juanito's brain so that even he did not know it was there, no one would ever know. But the tiny beamed transceptor in his skull, snugged down in the brain tissue, placed there by the Prober when he had first discovered Juanito was Eskalyo's son, and beamed to Don Eskalyo's thought patterns, as constructed from early retinal and thought patterns of Juanito—blazed.

The deadly beams slashed from Juanito's eyes. Eskalyo had but a split-second to duck. Unbidden, Juanito's eyes followed his father,

and the bright orange beams of destruction continued to stream forth, and Eskalyo dodged, ducked, flopped and rolled across the floor.

Juanito screamed, for the pain was terrible. He screamed because this was his life, being taken from him. He screamed because now that he had found his father he did not want to lose him! "*No! No no no, stop!*" he screamed at himself, but could do nothing. His eyes were drawn to his father, and he could not stop the beams of force from firing. He tore at his face, but the beams continued, and his eyes would not close, then—

Three deepsmen stepped out from behind curtains, their spearguns levelled, and they aimed at Juanito. "Wait, stop!" Eskalyo yelled, all the while dodging and struggling to keep out of the line of the beams.

He could not bring himself to kill his son.

"Kill me, kill me!" Juanito shrieked, and made to grab a speargun from one deepsman, even as his eyes were averted, still turned on his father.

They would not fire for their Don had not given his word. Juanito struggled, and he clutched at his pouch, and drew forth the vibro-blade, bringing it up to—

HE WAS BLIND. He was dying, but worse, he was blind. Per-

haps if he had been able to see, it might not have been so bad. He lay dying on the floor, blinded by his own hand, the soggy, pulped remain of half his face an aching pulse.

He was dying, and there was nothing to say. He had come a long way, and he knew it was this way all along. He was bound to death.

He had been doomed from the outset. Like a piece of wood, caught at the edge of the beach; it might roll with the waves for a long time, till it was thrust up onto the sands, where it would rot, still forever. Or, it might roll back into the ocean, and be lost in the waves. Either way, it was lost, even as he was lost.

He had nothing to say. That was the way of the assassin. He held tightly to his father's hand, and it said *I'm home, father, now I'm home*. He did not speak, but Don Eskalyo heard the silent words whispering on the air.

Soon, he died. Quietly. Not at all the way he had lived, so young to die, so full of violence. Quietly he died.

And Eskalyo was silently glad it had happened this way, this terrible way it had happened. Glad, for he knew he was saved by the very AmericaState that had tried to destroy him. He had been saved by their instrument, his son. A son he

would have had to kill himself—for that was what he was about to tell Juanito before the weapon exploded into life.

He would have had to tell him that no matter how hard Juanito tried, the new world had no place for him and his violence. It had no place for a man who knew nothing but death.

The world would be clean some day soon. It would be free of all AmericaState had brought about—even free of men like Juanito Montoya.

The means was *not* worth the end. The manner in which Juanito Montoya had gotten to Ciudad Rosario, the way in which he had

treated Elena, they were all typical of the man, and no change could be brought about that would be final and complete. So, an outcast in a world that had made him, Juanito would have been condemned by his father's hand. To protect the world Juanito wanted to see.

It had had to be that way.

Now it was finished. It was silence and depth.

Later, they took him out far out into the Pampas, and buried him where the birds would not fly over him, and the wind would not disturb him, and he could find the one peace left to a man who knew only the way of the assassin.

Sleep.



"Barton and I have been testing these berries for the past hour, sir, with no ill effects."

They were kids with personality problems, so they joined tough gangs, living only to fight and kill. Society had to find a way to correct —

The Vicious Delinquents

by

Mark Reinsberg

TWO OR THREE THINGS worried me on my trip back to the hideout. So my astro-gation was sloppy and I kept losing Jupiter's shadow.

First, there was the showdown with Naomi over who would lead the Callisto gang. This meant another degravity fight with python whips and steel claws. Having just gotten rid of the old battle scars on my cheek, shoulder and breast, I wasn't so eager to have my title back on the same disfiguring terms.

On the other hand, wouldn't the girls take it as a sign of cowardice if I tried to settle peaceably for second in command?

Next, I kept thinking about the money I'd taken from my parents the day before. What amazed me was how they could be so stupid as to believe I would go to Mars and enroll in that technical school. Two thousand solars was just

enough to buy this sweet second-hand 2064 model Spacer coupe. The gals in our ordnance crew would rig it up with missile launchers, turn it into a killer, flagship of our fleet.

But just now my ship was unarmed, defenseless. And as I approached our base on airless, rocky Callisto I again had the feeling I was being followed, trailed in space.

Not by any of the Io boys; I was pretty sure of that. Because that brave gang will always attack when the odds are five to one in their favor. And not by the police either. They've always left us alone. Someone else.

I circled Jupiter's fifth moon warily, searching a half million square miles of space for the suspected other rocket, but my instruments detected nothing man-made. So I radioed the password



and hastily set down in the mouth of a giant natural cave entrance—the airlock of our underground hideout.

While air hissed into the chamber I strapped on my weapons belt and glanced in the doorway mirror. Not—mind you—because there's anything particularly feminine about me, but it's still such a surprise not to find a face full of claw marks that I studied my appearance with a kind of stranger's curiosity. Even without scars, I would hardly call myself an attractive girl.

My black dyed hair had reverted to its original blond shade, and the same shoulder length it had had two years ago when I was matrixed. I had a fifteen-year-old's applecheeked complexion, and thick eyebrows that met above the bridge of my long thin nose and cried out for plucking. My ears were too large and my jaw rather sharply angular. Only my neck seemed gracefully proportioned—long, finely sculptured.

At the rest, sheathed in a black metallic leotard, I could only shrug.

The airlock opened. Chin up-lifted, I strode from my ship with python whip coiled in my hand, steel claws jingling at my waist. My name, in case you're interested, is Vera.

AT THE HEAVILY GUARDED first corridor I was met by Ginger, a fat fog-throated valkyrie who serves as our security officer.

"We were almost ready to blast you, my dear. Good thing you signalled when you did."

We rapped the knuckles of our clenched fists in greeting.

"What's happened in the past week?" I asked. "Kill any more Ios?"

Ginger grimaced. "Naw. I shot the arm off one but I don't think he died. Ran into him in an alley in Ganymede City. Imagine that guy! He was trying to steal an air synthesizer I myself had just stolen."

The corridor led to the First Hall, a large vestibule bright with luminescent wall paint where eight tunnels branched off into separately hollowed-out caverns in the rocky guts of Callisto.

"I'm itching to get back into combat," I said. "What do you say we make a raid on the Io boys tomorrow?"

Ginger realized I was testing her loyalty. "I'd like nothing better," she responded heartily. "But of course we'll have to clear it with Naomi first."

I stopped abruptly. "Since when?"

"Well, Vera, she became leader the day after you fell."

"By whose authority?" I said indignantly.

"Don't play dumb recruit. You know our system. We had no way of knowing you'd return. Naomi and half a dozen others declared for title, and Naomi won out in a fair gang fight. Just like you did before her."

"So it seems we have two leaders now," I said, limbering my python whip.

"That's something you and Naomi will have to work out," Ginger intoned. "I'll leave you here to choose your own tunnel."

This was part of the ritual of our gang. When a new girl arrived, the tunnel she selected, blindly, determined her branch of service on Callisto. One tunnel led to commissary, another to transport, another to ordnance, another to facilities, and the remaining four to combat training units. A girl had to be rather unlucky to miss out on the fighting branch, but in the other units she at least learned a great deal about thievery, heavy drinking and the use of dope.

Knowing where each tunnel led, my present choice was simple: by seven tunnels I could postpone an immediate showdown with Naomi, since these went to barracks and work rooms and supply centers. The eighth tunnel led directly to

the great assembly hall and administrative headquarters. There, Naomi would be holding council. This was the tunnel I chose.

I was halfway through it when a bunch of the senior gang members met me head on. They were battle-tested gals of seventeen and eighteen with hair waved in the short Grecian style and short sleeveless tunics of green, red, yellow or black, depending on their unit.

They hailed me enthusiastically. "Vera, welcome back! Beautiful ship you brought. Hey, your hair: you look like a kid again. No more scars! Are you going to challenge Naomi?"

Somehow everyone else shut up in time for this question to stand out like a band instrument taking the wrong repeat. They were all eyeing me expectantly.

I threw my head back with a short laugh. "I'm still the leader of this gang."

To lend point to the declaration I cracked the coils of my python whip, flooring but not badly hurting a young recruit rushing up the tunnel to meet us. The girl shrieked.

"Wow!" one senior exclaimed. "A showdown between two leaders! That's never happened before. This is going to be interesting."

We helped the recruit to her

feet. She limped along but knew better than to reveal her pain. "Girls," she said, gasping, "Naomi has called a formation! Hurry!"

The words were hardly out of her mouth when the formation alarm reverberated in the passageway. That gave everybody just thirty seconds to line up with their units in the assembly hall, and my escort of girls plunged on ahead of me. When I reached the great spiral-shaped hall at my own more deliberate pace, the gang already stood in formation.

I PAUSED at the entrance, for this is always an impressive moment on barren Callisto. The hall was a natural cavity half a mile deep, palely illuminated by the artificial sun hanging from a ceiling stalactite. The place was warm and moist-smelling like a greenhouse. Generations of girls before us had gradually modified the rock interior with hand blasters, carving out a series of broad, steplike plateaus along one rim. On each level a unit kneeled at attention on one knee, forming a circle around their respective husies (our term for captain) who stood rigidly erect holding a green nuclear torch, emblem of our gang. To me it was a beautiful sight, especially the raising of the degravity dais.

Up, out of the verdant depths of the cave, overgrown with Earth-style trees and tropical foliage, rose the great ceremonial platform reserved for the gangleader and her administrative aides. As this cleared the rim and stabilized in midair, Naomi became visible to all and a raucus female cheer went up from the ranks.

Jeanette, my former protocol officer, stepped forward waving the 'parade rest' command. She was a tall lanky farm girl with lots of common sense, and evidently she'd been promoted to second in command.

"Girls," she said in her steady, emotionless voice, amplified a hundred times by her throat piece projector, "just a brief announcement before we hear from our leader. Yesterday a brawl took place in the Spilka Skating Palace in Ganny City, and one of our girls failed to return. Some of you may remember what a beautiful job Phyllis did of poisoning the Io gang's food shipment a while back, and we think the boys must've found out she was the one. Anyway, they kidnapped her and we have every reason to believe she's being tortured right now in that fort of theirs on Io.

"Let's just assume she'll crack eventually and tell them our code. From now on all external com-

munication will use code 0-97, and you new girls will have to see your hussy right after this formation ends if you expect to have it memorized by tomorrow morning."

Jeanette nodded with the barest trace of a sadistic grin as a murmur of consternation rippled through the ranks of our rookies. "That's all from me," she added, "and now here's Naomi."

I hadn't moved from the entrance. Now, as Naomi spoke, I began my calm, unhurried, and, I hoped, supremely dignified march towards the dais.

"Girls, I want to add this to what Jeanette told you," Naomi began. "We're going to revenge this outrageous kidnapping at the earliest possible moment. My staff and I are working countermeasures that will make the Ios rue the day they ever pulled this stunt on one of our girls."

At first, all eyes were centered on Naomi, and no one observed my approach from the rear of the hall. And I don't believe Naomi herself could see me with the lights focussed on her face, though obviously she knew of my arrival. She was a short, shapely sixteen-year-old, full of gestures and animation. She wore her brown hair in bangs, her features forming an attractive oval, her dark eyes flashing with self-assurance. Her

clothes were a green version of my own leotards, only tighter. But as usual, claw marks marred her appearance, and it seemed to me even from a distance that she had lost the use of her left eye.

"Today, we want to welcome back one of our former leaders," Naomi continued, "a girl who has just returned from the Matrix Center, and is once again ready to do battle for the glory of our gang. This great Callisto had the misfortune to be killed in a fight with private detectives during that costly, but on the whole successful, raid on the ration warehouse on Eros. I refer, of course, to our own immortal Vera . . . whom I believe is . . ." (here Naomi peered out into the darker recesses of the hall) ". . . among us right now."

Another cheer went up, and everybody looked about in various directions until a spotlight finally caught my deliberate striding figure working its way towards the platform.

"Because this is sort of an unusual situation," said Naomi in cool candor, "one that doesn't seem to be covered by any of our by-laws, it appears that Vera will have to start at the bottom again as a new recruit. Because, you see, for all practical purposes, she's a new person altogether."

An angry flush shot through my body.

"However," Naomi added patronizingly, "we're all sure that Vera's abilities will be recognized quite soon, even as a recruit, and that she will rapidly rise to a new position of leadership within our organization."

"More rapidly than you can imagine!" I shouted at the top of my voice. Unaided by an amplifier it must have sounded feeble even to the front ranks. But in the same instant I wound up on one foot and cracked my whip resoundingly in her direction, and there was no mistaking this defiant gesture.

A ROAR OF EXCITEMENT arose from the gang. For a moment there was confusion on the dais as Naomi and her aides consulted. The clamor grew louder. "Duel! Duel!" echoed through the hall. I knew this wasn't a case of loyalty to me; everyone was eager to watch a nice bloody fight, any moment of the day or night.

Putting on my steel claws, I advanced to the edge of the chasm, opposite the leader's platform. Here the seven-eighths Earth gravity we artificially maintained in our hideout began to fade. The ravine itself was subject only to Callisto's feeble attraction. Twenty-five feet away, Naomi came out of the hud-

dle and signalled for silence. While the clamor was subsiding I saw Jeanette jump off the dais onto one of the lower plateaus and disappear in one of the tunnels. I poised myself for the leap.

"Now look, gang," said Naomi. "Jeanette is our protocol expert and it's her opinion that no challenge is in order. She doesn't remember any precedent for a leader returning from Matrix, but she's just taken off for the archive room to look up the records." A chorus of boos and catcalls broke out, and this got under Naomi's skin.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, we can have this business over with right now," she shouted, snapping claws over her wrists.

I hurled myself across space, landing on the far corner of the platform, whip upraised to strike the first blow. Almost in the same instant, half a dozen aides leaped to safety on the lower plateau.

Naomi cocked her whip with lightning speed, to my surprise, lashing out ahead of me. But because of her bad eye it was a poorly aimed blow which I dodged easily, and before she could regain her balance I brought my whip down with full force across her shoulders.

She shuddered in pain, and a great red welt opened up along

her neck. First blood. A roar went up from the spectators, who had now broken formation to crowd along the edges of the chasm.

Instinctively Naomi clutched for my whip, but I recoiled it in time and swung a second time. It cut searingly into her side, winding about her waist with a python action that crushed out her breath. I moved in for the kill with up-lifted claws. Suddenly Naomi leaped from the dais, high into the air.

It was a brilliant defensive move. I had no time to think, but the alternatives were simple: hold onto the whip handle and be pulled after her, or let go and be minus a whip.

I held on and we went rocketing to the rough-hewn ceiling. We bounced off the rock roof, I barely managing to switch my feet to where my head had been to absorb the ricochet. Then we went sailing down, almost leisurely in the weak gravity, to the bottom of the cavern. And this time I was absorbing the whiplash, as Naomi, knotting mine about her waist, so that I couldn't retract it, swung her own whip with vicious skill. *Whff!* My thighs. *Whff!* My face. *Whff!* My breast.

She was cutting me to pieces; I was in agony as we fell that half mile. Desperately I tried to ward

off her blows. Then I realized there was only one solution: infighting.

I tugged with all my strength at my whip handle. She kept thrashing and I kept pulling at my line, pulling her closer and closer, until she could no longer use her whip effectively at such close range. My head was foggy from the beating. I gave a final tug and lurched at her throat with my steel claws.

She deflected one claw, but the other sank in, and I remember how her eyes began to widen in terror. Then . . . darkness hit me.

I AWOKE STARING up at tall lanky Jeanette, as my brain slowly stopped revolving inside my cranium.

"You battered your head against the rock wall, my dear Vera," she said.

"Naomi?" I asked. "Is she—?"

"She lost consciousness too, but for a different reason. Loss of blood. You tore open her jugular vein. We picked both of you up off the cavern floor."

I sat up slowly, dizzily. "So who's leader now?"

Jeanette smiled and shook her head. "I don't know. None of us is too sure. We've never had a situation like this before. But we think Naomi is. She regained con-

sciousness first."

I sank back on the pillow, trying to collect my thoughts.

Naomi came into view. She had been standing behind the headboard. Her throat was a mess despite the basic telesurgery, but her expression was friendly.

"Look, Vera, I'm willing to admit I would have lost. You out-fought me. But luck was on my side and I won."

"You're right there, sister," I sighed, mustering a smile. I noticed also that they'd fixed her eye—considerably improving her appearance.

"Well, since neither of us was in a position to finish the other one off, it's still a complicated proposition. I mean, about the title," Naomi clarified.

I again managed to sit up and felt the strength begin returning to my limbs. If you aren't stone dead, modern medicine can heal almost anything nowadays in a matter of hours, which I find reassuring. "What do you propose, another duel?"

"That doesn't make much sense," said Jeanette. "Why fight among ourselves when there are so many of those stupid boys buzzing around?"

"Yes, what I was going to suggest," Naomi said eagerly, "is that we sort of share the leadership un-

til one or the other of us gets killed in battle."

I thought for a moment and then clenched my fist, and we knocked knuckles grinning at each other.

I got to my feet. "What are your plans to strike back at the Io gang?"

"Frankly, that was just for public consumption," Naomi admitted. "We don't have any plans as yet."

"Well," I said, "let's the two of us get in a ship and just bomb hell out of their home base."

Naomi showed surprised. "Right now? In our condition?"

"Sure. What this gang needs is a little boost in morale."

Naomi nodded, her brown eyes flashing. "Good. We'll go in my ship."

Together we strode from the sickbay, through the tunnel to the airlock. Ginger intercepted us at the First Hall. Her guards held a man at pistol point.

"Naomi . . . Vera . . . whichever of you is in charge now. We've just caught an Io spy!"

He was an older man, balding, seedy-appearing in an old-style tweed suit. He stared at us in a calm, unflustered manner, plainly curious.

"Oho! Now we can get even for the way they treated Phyllis." Naomi was gleefully thumbing

through her mental catalog of torture techniques.

"If he's a spy," I said, "let's not waste any time on him now. We can take care of him when we get back."

Jeanette had followed us in the tunnel. "He doesn't look like a spy to me," she said drily.

"Oh no?" said Ginger. "Then how did he find our hideout? How did he learn our landing code?"

Suddenly I recalled my feeling of being followed. "I thought there was someone trailing me in space this morning. All the way from Ganymede I had the weirdest sensation."

"Well, that may explain how he got here," said Jeanette, "but I still say this guy isn't a spy."

"You're quite right," said the man. "I'm not a spy."

"Sure," Jeanette continued in her lanky farm accents, "the first prerequisite for a spy is to look inconspicuous. This old character couldn't do much hiding in a girl's dormitory."

"Old man, how did you come here?" I demanded.

"I landed at the entrance of your cave, madam, and asked to be admitted. Then your colleagues," he nodded at Ginger, "seized me before I could explain my purpose in coming here."

"No matter what he says, I

think he's a spy," said Ginger. "This is a very subtle angle they're playing. I'm security officer; it's my job to outguess them."

Naomi was impatient. "Well, if you think he's a spy, then shoot him."

"Yes," said Ginger, "why should we take chances?"

The man showed irritation. "Young lady," he told Ginger very sternly, "I must at this point advise you that my life is not on file at Matrix Center, and that any contemplated execution of me would constitute murder. Irrevocable murder."

"This guy speaks like a lawyer," Jeanette murmured in my ear. "Better investigate."

"What kind of identification did you find on him?" I asked Ginger.

"Oh, a bunch of papers saying he was an assistant professor at Mars University. But those are easily forged."

"A professor, eh? What's your field? What are you doing here?"

He stared at me with a kind of superior smile. I had the vague feeling I'd seen him before, which is ridiculous: I've never been on Mars.

"Ah, at last some intelligent questions. My field, young lady, is sociology. I happen to be doing some research on juvenile delinquency, which is why I came here.

Lewis Worth is my name. Are you perhaps the leader of this gang? If so, I would appreciate your help."

Ginger snorted. "What a fantastic line!"

Naomi looked at me quizzically. Was I in fact the leader?

I hedged. "Look, Ginger. There isn't time to investigate his story. Right now, Naomi and I have a little mission to accomplish. So keep this guy under guard until we get back."

Deep down in me I felt resentment about all this tact I had to use. Why *shouldn't* I be the leader? The girls instinctively looked to me, obeyed me. Why *shouldn't* I be the one to give orders, make decisions? This pretense of shared leadership with Naomi could only last a day, two days, a week at most. And then would come the final showdown.

WE ROCKETED into orbit with Jupiter's innermost satellite—I piloting, Naomi astrogating. Io showed up like a pea-sized blemish against the bloated planetary face, whirled into tan-grey zones of supercold methane by thousand-mile-hour helium trade-winds. Jupiter the heavy, inhospitable.

Almost beneath us now, the boys' domed hangout glowed dully green in the feeble Jovian sunlight.

Naomi readied the missile launchers. Seconds later, before we were within firing range, the first of the boys' space cruisers zoomed up to intercept us. They were ready for our ship but not our strategy.

Down we plunged in a searing power dive, straight for the hangout's vulnerable airlock. Missiles exploded on all sides of us, harmlessly, as our phantom target defense went automatically to work. Our radio crackled with barked commands and alarmed oaths between the boys' ships and Io headquarters.

"Zero range!"

"They're coming in!"

"Damn those girls!"

"Look out! We can't stop them!"

"It's a suicide dive! Man your crash stations!"

We dropped down, inches above ground level of the airless moon, our nose pointed like a needle at the green bubble. Suddenly I braked our speed with reverse rockets, bruising my ribs with deceleration.

"Fire!" I shouted.

Naomi launched the first missile straight for their airlock. It struck just before the emergency siege gate slid shut, blasting jagged holes through the outer and inner locks. Air whooshed from the dome, hurling men and debris into the vacuum. Seconds later the catas-

trophe seal was oozing down to plug the hole, but by then our ship had plunged through.

"You've done it!" Naomi screamed joyously. "We're inside!"

"And their fleet is outside, and there's nothing the boys can do about it."

I slowed our ship to practically zero ground speed. We hovered for a moment near the ceiling of the great transparent dome, considering our next target. Below us lay the ramshackle gangland, a maize of roofless partitions clustered around a tiny lake. One quarter of the city was virtually an open-air machine shop. Near the shattered airlock stood a parade ground, overlooked by a tall, balconied tower with people on top making frantic gestures.

"I'll bet that's headquarters."

"Down it goes," said Naomi excitedly.

I put our ship in a dive. She aimed quickly, triggered the missile.

Boom! The tower collapsed. Tiny figures began to scurry about on the parade ground.

"Let's get 'em!"

I skimmed the field and Naomi blazed away with the vibro gun. One after another the boys dissolved in puffs of smoke. I veered around and we strafed them again, killing hundreds.

I felt exhilarated, marvelously happy.

Naomi shrieked ecstatically.

In another minute there were no more boys alive who hadn't taken shelter underground.

I glanced upward and laughed. The boys' fleet swarmed helplessly outside the dome like bugs on a lampshade, watching their hang-out ripped to pieces.

"Get their arsenal!" cried Naomi.

"Revenge for Phyllis!"

We dived again, spraying the roofless barracks with destruction, blasting huge craters in their machine shop, starting explosions of ammunition that rocked our ship, threatening to blow off the dome in one piece.

At last the fun ended. "Only one missile left," Naomi warned.

"Hang on, then," I said gaily, stabbing the rocket controls. "Calisto girls are homeward bound!"

Blam! went our torpedo, tearing a second hole in the mangled airlock. And out that hole we went, accelerating like crazy, pursued into deep space by the entire enemy fleet.

AS LONG AS WE were chased, and missile fragments rattled against our hull, we continued in high spirits. Even when the boys scored a hit that forced us to don our space suits, we remained

elated. But the minute the Ios broke off pursuit we renewed our antagonism.

"Say," said Naomi over her helmet phone, "this isn't the right course for Callisto."

"No, dear, I'm landing on Ganymede first. I don't think it's safe to go on until we get that fuel leak fixed."

"Why should we pay good money to a mechanic when our own girls can do the job?"

"We'd never reach Callisto. You don't realize how dense the fumes are in this cabin. We could explode just like that." I tried futilely to snap my clumsy spacesuit fingers.

"Look," said Naomi irritably, "let me do the worrying. I'm the leader and I say we go directly home."

"I beg your pardon," I objected, holding my temper. "I understood this was a fifty-fifty proposition."

"Callisto!" she snarled. "I order you."

"Shut up!" I snapped. "I'm pilot of this ship, and space law says you obey me."

We'd have had our final showdown right then and there, except it's practically impossible to wrestle in spacesuits.

We landed in Ganymede City and haggled over price with the same garageman who sold me my used 2064 Spacer (being equipped

for battle by our ordnance crew even as we talked). He brought his bid down finally from a hundred to seventy-five solars.

"Okay, have it ready in an hour," I said, walking from the shop.

Naomi followed indignantly. "Vera. Just where in the hell are you going to get seventy-five solars?"

I paused on the sidewalk, hands hitched to my weapons belt. "I'll dig it up if you'll agree to do some research for me."

Naomi smiled craftily. "Steal it, eh? All right, I'll go along with you for the time being."

I left her at the public library and headed, with serious misgivings, in the direction of my family home.

Ganymede City is a drab industrial town of a million or so people, with very little excitement or glamor beneath its turquoise dome. The chamber of commerce used to give a big buildup to the view of Jupiter and the good job opportunities when they first wanted to attract workers from Earth. Those poor shnooks soon got fed up with astronomy when the boom fizzled out and the only jobs left were in the metal refineries.

I hate my father who is a jerk just like the rest of them. Never quite became shop foreman. Never

quite able to buy his own house. Never quite saved enough to move his family to Saturn's ring where the real boom took place. And always so damn preachy to me and the younger kids. And my mother disgusted me too for just sitting around and taking it all those years.

"What are you doing here?" my father demanded. "You're supposed to be on your way to Mars."

"Vera, what happened?" my mother whined. "Why aren't you on the ship?"

"I need a little more money. Seventy-five solars."

"What do you mean, a little more money?" said my father angrily. "What happened to the money we gave you?"

"And the tickets," my mother, anxiously. "You promised me you'd go to school. What did you do with the tickets?"

"Don't worry. I got a refund. It's all in a safe place."

My father got menacing. "Say, just what are you up to? You haven't gone back to that gang by any chance?"

"Oh God forbid!" my mother cried.

"I need seventy-five solars," I repeated calmly. "Are you going to give it to me?"

"Answer me!" my father roared. "Have you gone back to that gang?"

"That's none of your damn business."

Infuriated, he started towards me. "No daughter of mine is going to talk to me like that. I'm going to give you the spanking you've had coming for seventeen years."

I drew my whip and slashed him down the side of his face and chest, cutting his shirt half open. He sat down with an unbelieving expression and fingered the red welt. He looked at me through glazed eyes, almost in a state of shock, as I rewound my whip.

My mother broke the long silence. "Here, Vera. Here are your seventy-five solars. We never want to see you or hear from you again."

NEWS OF OUR GANG WARS rarely appears in the adult press. I guess they're afraid the publicity might encourage more teenagers to join up. But the colonial struggle with Sirius had ended, and there wasn't much else happening in the Solar System just at that time, so our raid on Io made the headlines.

GIRLS BLAST BOY HIDE-OUT

*Callisto fleet bombs, strafes
Io base in bloody juvenile gang
war*

*Humiliated Ios vow retaliation
for fifty-ship sneak attack*

We were received as heroes by our gang. Even the inaccuracies in the news story contributed to our glory—the Ios being ashamed to admit all the havoc was the result of only one solitary girl ship. Our hussies and aides greeted us in the First Hall with a wild cheer, crowding around us to beg for details.

"Later," said Naomi, flushed with triumph, "we'll call a formation later. We'll tell our story to the entire gang."

"Back to your posts, now!" I shouted. "You hussies get your girls ready for battle. We can expect the boys to counterattack at any time."

The First Hall cleared rapidly of all except a few of our top officers.

"Confidentially," I said, "I won't go for any more of this shared leadership stuff. This gang can only be run by one boss at a time. It's going to be either me or Naomi, but not both of us."

"Those are my sentiments exactly," said Naomi. "Let's get this fight over with once and for all."

Jeanette, always the reasonable one, stepped forth quietly. "Look, this is a very bad time to hold a duel, just when we're waiting for the Ios to appear."

"Yeah, you two, you're spoiling our victory celebration."

"Put it off until tomorrow."

"Until after the next meeting."

"Besides," added Jeanette, "Naomi and Vera worked well enough together during their raid on Io."

"Yes! That's right! We'll need you!"

The sentiment for postponement of our duel was irresistible. We both bowed to it as gracefully as we could.

"I'll work with you, Naomi, but I'll hate you every minute of it."

"Likewise!" she snarled, "and twice as much."

Fat, fogthroated Ginger edged next to me. "Well, now that that's settled for the time being, maybe you two can agree on what to do with this spy we caught."

"Shoot him!" said Naomi. "He's a man."

"Let's first determine whether or not he's a spy," I said.

"There you two go disagreeing again," Ginger complained. "Now just what do you want me to do with him?"

"I've worked out a test we can give him. We can tell whether he's lying or telling the truth when he says he's a professor."

"Oh, this is all so much nonsense," said Naomi impatiently. She withdrew a piece of paper from her belt wallet, handed it to me. "Here," she said sarcastically, "here is that research you had me

do at the library. I authorize you to handle this matter for both of us."

She stalked out of the hall with a short, scornful laugh.

GINGER HAD LOCKED him in the nuclear torch storeroom, a none too healthy place. We escorted him to the communications office. I began the interrogation.

"You say your name is—?"

"Lewie Worth."

"And your occupation is a professor?"

"Assistant professor of sociology, Mars University." He clipped his words with deliberate over-formality. His expression was faintly amused.

"So you say, and so your papers say, but those could be forgeries, you admit?"

"Yes, that's possible," he replied softly, "but it's so easy for you to check with my department."

"Undoubtedly there is someone there by that name," Ginger interjected. "But that doesn't prove your identity."

"I have here a list of members of your alleged department. If you actually belong to it you should be able to give me their names."

He nodded slowly. "A fair test."

"Then call them off, beginning with the department chairman. And if you make a single mistake,

I'll have my girl shoot you on the spot."

Ginger raised her blaster eagerly.

A minute later she lowered it in disappointment.

"Very well," I said. "You weren't lying. Now tell me why you came here. And be brief, if you please. Because, fifteen minutes from now I want you on your ship heading back to wherever you came from."

The professor stared at me for a moment. "The truth is, I came to see you."

Ginger blushed, the first time I had ever seen her do a thing like that. "Wait outside," I told her sternly.

When we were alone I faced him inquiringly.

"Oh don't misunderstand me," he began. "It isn't anything personal. And then again, maybe it is. You see, in my academic language, you represent the charismatic personality."

"Just what do you mean?" I demanded.

"Well, as I told you, I'm studying juvenile delinquency, gangs, and leaders of gangs—the whole problem of youth's orientation in society, and the way he reacts. Frankly, Vera, you and your gang have built up a terrible reputation in adult circles, and I, for one, am

perfectly fascinated. I wonder if you'd admit me to your gang?"

"What the hell are you talking about!" I was really shocked.

"Oh—oh—strictly as an observer, mind you. For a short time only."

"Not a chance, professor."

"You see, I'm seeking to understand—and it would be a contribution to social science if you'd help me find out—just why you teenagers are striking out at each other, scorning adult society, rejecting the opposite sex. And equally interesting to me is the subtle change that takes place each time a—"

I cut him short. "Look, Professor Worth. You said you haven't been matrixed. Then this is no place for you to set up shop. Because war is our way of life, and someone is liable to kill you just for the fun of it. Bad situation for a man like yourself who can only afford to die once."

I strode to the door. "Ginger, escort the professor to his ship."

It was a good thing we got rid of him then. Minutes later, our instruments detected ships within a quarter of a million miles, and the alert was sounded. Shortly afterwards, we made positive identification: the Io gang!

Naomi and I quarreled for a second over strategy. Should we

split up, each leader piloting her own ship and responsible for half the fleet? Or should the two of us occupy one ship? I insisted on the latter, and when Naomi disagreed I knocked her unconscious with the butt of my whip and dragged her into my own Spacer coupe. Ordnance had worked fast. It was fully equipped for battle.

I ordered our entire fleet into attack formation. Together we zoomed up to meet the oncoming enemy, ninety of our spaceships to a hundred and ten of theirs.

I rocketed out in front of my fleet. The boys had begun firing. Their missiles exploded in space like brilliant fireworks, multi-colored bursts on all sides of us. I signalled my girls to commence firing, launching our first missile at point-blank thousand-mile range.

It scored a direct hit, exploding an Io ship to comet dust. I felt serenely happy. I wanted to share my feeling of triumph with Naomi who still lay unconscious on the cabin floor.

"Hey, girl, wake up! We're in combat!"

She stirred, started to regain her senses. Her eyes fluttered. Just as they opened our ship exploded to oblivion.

This was familiar, this coming out of sleep with infinitely

tender caresses of light, in a vacuum tube the exact shape of your naked body, a tube that dissolved at the exact instant of awakening into a warm epidermal glow, while the bee-like humming faded into silence and only the barest trace of hyacinth scent lingered in the nostrils. It had happened before. How many times? Once? Twice? Three times? All my limbs felt supremely relaxed as after sedation. All my thoughts were clear and calm as a hidden spring on a wooded hillside. Earth summer. Timeless.

Abruptly the marble slab felt cold against my back and the spell was broken. I sat up too suddenly, for a monitor voice said, reassuringly:

"Have no fear, young lady. You have awakened in the Matrix Center on Ganymede. There, you will recall, you at some time in the past commissioned us to make a vibration pattern of your total physical, mental and spiritual self."

"You did this," the recording continued, "against the possibility that, at some future time, accident or the unavoidable hazards of honor would result in your organically premature death. And this has come to pass. But, by means of your matrix, you have escaped dissolution. You are an exact dupli-

cate of your former self in all but the most minor respects.

"Congratulations on your good fortune, and welcome to a new life where we trust you will find the greatest measure of personal fulfillment."

As the recording ended, an attendant entered the room.

"Hello, Vera." She was smiling and pleasant voiced. "Want to put on that white gown and come with me?"

I followed her in bare feet over carpeting soft as lamb wool, into an office that was really not much like an office—more like a cozily furnished living room. On the couch sat a balding man in a tweed suit.

Vague earlier memories gradually took shape. "Is this my placement interview?"

The man smiled. "Yes. You have a wonderful memory net in that brain of yours."

"Wasn't I supposed to remember?"

"It's usually one of the things erased in the duplication process. But then, you were here not so very long ago."

I tried to recall. "It couldn't have been too recently."

Again the interviewer smiled. "Only a week ago, my dear."

He saw my dismay. "Oh, but don't let that bother you, Vera.

That's about par for gang leaders."

Curiously, when he said the words 'gang leaders' I felt a little bit embarrassed, almost ashamed.

"Well now," he said, getting down to business, "I should like to have a brief chat with you about your future. It's our job to help give you a fresh new start in life. Can you think of anything you'd especially like to do, any career you would like to follow?"

I considered this but drew a blank. "No, frankly, I can't."

"Well, then, perhaps you'd like to return to Callisto?" He said this in a totally neutral fashion.

"No. Not that anymore."

"Good," he said, rising to his feet.

All at once I was shivering and trembling. "Something is wrong with me. I mean, it's true what I just said. That's how I feel. I don't want to go back to the gang. But—I can remember how differently I felt—before. And somehow it seems wrong to change one's mind so—suddenly."

His hands rested on my shoulders. "Vera, this is what going through the matrix process does to a person." His voice was low, boundlessly sympathetic. "Each time it heals a little bit of your personality along with the physical battle scars. The change is very slight and very subtle. You hardly

noticed it at all the first time, did you?"

I shook my head. "But, how long can this . . . healing process go on?"

"Some personalities, Vera, are terribly hurt, and they must die several times before they become whole." He took my hand. "And now, my dear, allow me to suggest two alternatives for your future. Doubtlessly, in a universe of infinite possibilities there are infinite alternatives one might take. But I know you quite well (though this may surprise you) and I feel that if you can happily accept one of the two that I mention, you will not again have to seek death in order to return here. For that is, after all, the meaning of your immediate past."

"What are these two alternatives?" My voice was quite small. I felt as though my life was warped into this moment like a mobius sheet.

"You will go to Mars University, and there train yourself to become a laboratory technician, as you originally promised your parents. This is a useful profession, of service to society. Sufficient funds will be provided."

Chagrin filled me. I rebelled at the thought. "Or . . .?"

"Or—and this is also a hard choice, though it may seem glam-

orous at first—you may become a member of a select expedition to a remote star which our astronomers say has a planetary system capable of supporting our kind of life. There we will plant a new colony."

Joy and enthusiasm welled up inside me. "Why, that sounds wonderful! That's my choice."

He shook his head slowly. "Wait. Wait, Vera. This is also to be considered. You will never again see Jupiter or any of the Solar System. You will travel for a hundred and fifty years. Most of this time you will sleep in deepfreeze state, of course. But inevitably you will age twenty years in the process."

This meant I would arrive at the other end, thirty-seven years old. My eagerness cooled. "What a pair of alternatives!"

He nodded gravely. "You give them both some thought. Meanwhile in the next room you'll find some new clothes. See me afterwards." He pressed a button on the edge of the couch and the attendant came in.

"Yes, Professor Worth?"

"Take Vera along please."

Something buzzed alive in my brain. It was like a set of tumblers clicking into place. I remembered. I turned at the door.

"I remember you! You were the

spy—that is—"

"Yes, my dear."

"But—"

He smiled. "I was observing you, Vera. You were due for your fifth matrix—your last by law. Society didn't want to lose you. I hoped my appearance would react on your subconscious, bring your previous experiences here forward. To help bring out the good, so to speak. It was strictly experimental."

He was still smiling as the door closed behind me.

In the next room, Naomi had just finished dressing. She glared her hostility.

"That was a lousy trick you played on me, Vera."

"I guess it was. I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*! Girl, if I had my whip and claws right now I'd *make* you feel sorry."

I was silent a moment. Then I asked her, almost timidly: "Naomi, you're not going back to the gang now, are you?"

She stared at me peculiarly. "Are you mad? Of course I'm going back. I'm *leader* of the Callisto girls." She stomped through the outer door, and I had the feeling she would be back more than once.

When I had put my clothes on—a simple brown jerkin with blue long-sleeved shirt—I returned to my interviewer. "Professor Worth, may I propose a third alternative?

After all, if this is a universe of infinite possibilities, maybe two is narrowing it down too much.

"Professor, I know I can never go back to the girl-gang way of life. And I understand now why the police left us alone when we ran wild. They were letting us work out our problems.

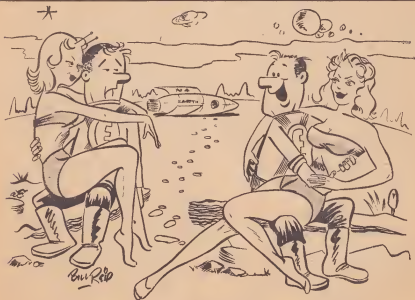
"And somehow, that's why I feel I have to reject your two alternatives. I'm me, and I can't limit myself in the ways you suggest. You needn't be afraid. I won't break any more of society's rules. I won't try to hurt anybody, deliberately. I'll probably get a job

somewhere, on this planet or some other planet. Maybe I'll make myself useful, maybe not.

"But what does the universe have to offer a girl of my experience and energy and," I hesitated, "charismatic personality? I intend to find out. I want the freedom to find out. Do you see? My third alternative, Professor, is to walk out that door with no obligation to anyone."

He seemed not to be listening. He seemed to be thinking his own thoughts.

"I think that can be arranged," he said finally.



"Cheer up, Jones. After all, we did come here for samples!"

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Naturally, no girl existed whose beauty could not only drive men out of their minds but to suicide as well. Yet, what other explanation was there for —

Miss Impossible

by

C. H. Thames

WHEN CHIEF EDITOR Eustace Carmichael completed work on the sense-tape rushes delivered by jetcycle from the studio's Special Illusions department, an odd thing transpired.

Placing the sensetape on the rush screener and making a minute adjustment on the olfactory gain, Eustace Carmichael proceeded to run off the tape for his own edification, following which he opened the casement window of the laboratory and, with a sappy smile of bliss on his face, jumped out.

This would have resulted in tragedy except for the fact that the laboratory was on the first floor. Eustace Carmichael didn't care, if it had been the eighty-fifth floor he would have jumped anyway. Nevertheless he landed awkwardly, producing a number of interesting fractures. He was rushed to the hospital, but not before he

left a message for Donald Bowers, with whom he had had an appointment at nine-thirty. Still smiling in oafish pleasure he was carted away by soothing internes, having set the wheels of destiny in motion.

His message was the reason Donald Bowers handled the rushes can like a hot potato as he jet-cycled it over to the lot offices of Bucyrus P. Haig, Chairman of the Board and Director of Production for HOMEFLIX, INC. Following Carmichael's advice, Donald paused at the lot dispensary for a hypodermic full of sensory inhibitor. Feeling safe but lethargic he proceeded to the sanctum of his boss, where he plunked down the can and related the peculiar story of Carmichael's downfall, pulling on a briar as he did so.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" Cy Haig said, adjusting his aerochair to a more comfortable fit for his two hundred fifty pounds. "Sounds like

D. BRUCE BERRY



one of your puff jobs, Donald. Being p. r. director doesn't require that you believe your own releases, my boy."

Donald shook his head dubiously. "Dunno, Mr. Haig. The Special Illusions boys worked pretty hard. After all, it was a new challenge for them. Four of them went temporarily gaga, you'll recall, because they'd reached the end of their rope in producing newer, more horrifying all-dimensional monsters."

"That's right, it was time for a switch!" Cy Haig exclaimed. "Homeflix was built on skilled manipulation of viewing taste. The writing was on the wall. People tiring of utter horror. Blase. Give 'em a sensetape of excruciating torture—they laugh. That means no coins in the meter, Donald. I pride myself on being responsible for the brainstorm. We'll be riding the wave for years—unbearable beauty! Loveliness as excruciating as the most repellent monster. Two sides of the coin and all that, Donald."

Donald yawned. That damned injection. Better safe than sorry, though. Donald said, "Yes, sir, but Carmichael *did* jump. And the boys in Special Illusions *did* work under maximum therapeutic blood levels of the inhibitory drug. So perhaps you'd like me to call nurse,

so that you can take an injection before we view the first prints." Reluctantly Donald admitted, "To be honest, Mr. Haig, I took one. I want to see the thing all the way through."

"Bosh, bosh!" Cy Haig exclaimed. "Put 'em on the screen, boy. I'm made of iron."

Suppressing considerable doubt about the truth of the last remark Donald unpacked the rushes can and slipped the reel into the pneumatic wall slot. It was sucked away up the tube to the projector while a screen descended with a whirr on the opposite wall. The draperies closed automatically. Cy Haig pressed a stud on his desk, opened his mouth and let a Gibson capsule aimed by a tiny radar mechanism shoot from a hole in the desktop straight in his throat. His teeth crunched down, he hic-coughed, then asked as the room darkened:

"How about the process backgrounds from the planet Frijon?"

"Complete, Mr. Haig. The ship arrived home last Tuesday, and I saw fragments of the rush print last night. It's a new high in location realism, Frijon's mean temperature is one hundred ten degrees below. The steppes looked so bleak and cold I had to take a double sunlamp treatment afterward. When we fake in the shots

of the girl rising from the tundra, it'll be a wow. And the dermal track is sheer genius. I thought my legs were frozen solid when I'd finished the showing."

"No life on Frijon, eh?" Haig remarked as the projector whirled alive.

"Not a speck, sir. Oh-oh. Here she comes . . ."

SINCE THE BACKGROUND of the scene would later be added in the laboratory, using the Frijon location films, the girl appeared against a plain background. Donald gripped the arms of his chair and wondered if there'd been water in the hypodermic. He had an intense desire to strike his head on the carpet, to do anything that would relieve the intense sensory suffering generated by the overwhelming beauty of the girl on the screen. He didn't even hear the words of the script. He did notice that she was quite tall, but as for registering a more complete description, the effect was the same as if he had tried to stare straight into the sun and give a minute account of the gas explosions on its surface. With a start he realized that Bucyrus Haig, chuckling weirdly, was half way out of his chair, his eyes rolling feverishly in the direction of the draperies. And this was the fourteenth floor. Donald was

catapulted into action. He ran as hard as he could for the office door, which he reached in the manner of a slow motion runner. Though each movement was delayed by the inhibitory drug, he felt within himself that he was running a dash. Wrenching open the door, glad he had prepared for an emergency, he cried:

"All right, fellas, better stop him!"

Four burly white-coated internes from the dispensary charged into the room, one of them just in time to catch Cy Haig's belt, as the latter proceeded to hoist his bulk to the window sill. Mr. Haig was giggling. "Stop it, guys," he said in a silly voice. "Stop it, now. All I want to do is jump out. That's all, just to take a nice little ride all the way down."

"Flipped," grunted one of the internes. He managed to return Cy Haig to the floor of the office, but Haig in the process began to cry unhappily. "Calm down, Mr. Haig . . ."

"Watch out, watch out," another of the internes exclaimed. "If he won't jump, I will!"

Horried, Donald realized that the new suicide candidate had been standing idly by, viewing the tape which still unreeled on the screen. While the internes wrestled with their mate who wanted to jump, Cy

Haig was up on the window sill again. Donald shut off the projector and rushed over just in time to prevent Haig from stepping out. Then the affected interne punched Donald in the nose and leaped to the sill. Another interne seized a massive water jug and crashed it down on the jumper's head. This nearly sent him out the window again. Donald made a grab for the man's shoe. Other hands finally joined in to help. By the time the three sane medicos had trundled the protesting Haig and the snoring interne from the room, Donald was a nervous wreck.

But one thing was sure. An emergency board meeting had to be called. The girl was just *too* lovely. *The Girl From Frijon* would have to be cancelled. All the scenes in which the utterly gorgeous creature did not appear had already been shot, but since *her* scenes, and the work they required, constituted nine-tenths of the production budget, the IBM stockholder computers would probably never allow an extension of the investment. Homeflix would need a new picture at once, a new angle.

The horror tapes were dead, all right. Horrifying beauty had seemed a logical alternative. In fact the *only* alternative. Six psychscribers had had nervous breakdowns trying to come up with any other

alternative which might whet the public's appetite. Earnings were down, box office returns had slumped over the last two Homeflix offerings, *In An Eighteenth-Century Torture Chamber* and *I Was a Nuclear Bomb*. No, the IBM stockholders machines would veto further expenditures, except maybe for some sixty-minute comedy, something in the simple knife murder vein, and there were a *million* of those films being beamed into homes, so the Homeflix slump would get worse, and . . . oh, hell. Donald wanted to lie down and go to sleep. Everything was confused. But he was Cy Haig's deputy in the event of emergency, so he had to think clearly. Fortunately the inhibitory drug was wearing off.

He pulled himself together, jetted down to the twelfth floor which housed the machines that constituted the company's controlling stock bloc, and in the audience chamber he sat down at what appeared to be a complicated electron typewriter. He picked out a message. REQUEST COMPANY MEETING 1100 HOURS. EMERGENCY PREVENTS COMPLETION OF CURRENT PROJECT. HEROINE TOO BEAUTIFUL FOR SENSORY PROJECTION. HUNDREDS OF DAMAGE SUITS FROM SUICIDE VIEWERS WOULD COUNTERACT

PROFIT MARGIN. PLEASE DIGEST AND BE PREPARED TO ADVISE. Donald hesitated, then pecked out THIS IS *REALLY* AN EMERGENCY. He signed the note BOWERS PER C. P. HAIG.

THEN HE CALLED the dispensary and told them to hurry and sober up the boss in time for the emergency session. Wearily clutching the rushes can, Donald proceeded down to his office on the seventh floor. There, in the corridor, he could actually hear the staff workers buzzing behind each door he passed. Word was out. Emergency meeting. Trouble. Well, it wasn't *his* damn fault. Homeflix was poorly managed, that's all. They'd have to get that damn IBM outfit to come overhaul their damn stockholder machines.

To compound his woes, he came face to face with Gordon Grimes in the corridor.

The thin, tweedy man, chief psychoscriber for Homeflix, was a dedicated enemy of Donald's ever since he'd been bypassed when Cy Haig selected Donald as his publicity director three years earlier. Donald knew Grimes had sworn to get even, biding his time until the right moment. From the smirk on Grimes' features it appeared that the right moment was at hand.

"Well, well," Grimes grinned. "Little Donald the profit butcher."

"Beat it, Gordon, huh? I'm tired."

"You'll get a nice rest as soon as the stockholder computers sift through the mess you and Porky Haig have made of the balance sheet. Oh, the news is all over the lot, Donny boy. *The Girl From Frijon* cancelled, eh? I told you it wouldn't work."

"You're just sore because it wasn't your idea, Gordon. Now get out of my way . . ."

"Gladly, wonder boy. But you'll recall I *did* state, from the very beginning, that the hare-brained scheme you and Porky cooked up—substituting excruciating loveliness for excruciating horror—not only violated all current rules of hypnotic audience sampling but was Freudianly fallacious as well. Heard about Carmichael jumping out the window, pal. And that's what'll happen when our homebody audience view the tape. In fact, I fed that opinion through the stockholder computers just fifteen minutes ago."

"That's hindsight if I ever saw it," Donald countered.

"Not at all. My memo warning against your foolish course of action, little Donald, was dated nine months ago. I know a few tricks to get around those machines. My

brother's a cybernetics professor out at the university, and he's not above a little swindle. As far as your concerned, chum, I spoke out against *The Girl From Frijon* long, long, ago, and the machines are discovering it right this minute."

"Any other tricks up your dirty little sleeve?" Donald inquired.

Grimes nodded, with a leer. "One. I just fed in another memo—no pre-dating this time—suggesting as Director of Production someone with more academic training, less fly-by-night methodology. Me. The kid with seniority. I think you'll have a surprise waiting for you when you attend your little meeting, dear Donald."

Donald's fist balled. "You're going to get a surprise yourself, Gordy, if you don't . . ."

"No, I'll skip along. No hard feelings, Donald. Just try to have your office cleaned out by four this afternoon, that's all." Grimes stalked triumphantly away.

Sinking still lower in the slough of despondency, Donald entered his office, and kicked his robot secretary in the shins for the hell of it. She squealed realistically as Donald locked himself in his inner chamber, sank down in his aero-chair and bit savagely into a couple of Vat 69 capsules. It didn't do any good. No amount of alcohol could refute the confusion worked by the

too-expert job of the Special Illusion boys, nor could it refute the bitter truth of the words of Gordon Grimes. The bum was right. He probably *would* end up running things. Sighing unhappily, Donald leaned back and covered his eyes for a moment.

That's when it happened, the soft puff of sound, the bright glow of brilliance. Donald slowly looked up—straight into the eyes of the girl from Frijon.

"All right, you rats," Donald shouted. "Come out of the closet and forget the practical jokes. Come on, now. I can't take too much of this. Turn off the machine . . ."

"There's no machine," she said. She reached out and touched his cheek.

Donald stared at the creature, the exact image from the sense-tape except *alive*, full-fleshed, in the same diaphanous something she had worn in the picture. Suddenly Donald felt as though he were gripped by fever. His palms grew moist. His temples throbbed. While she kept smiling at him, softly and tolerantly, his eyes swiveled right and left, finally lighting on the casement windows. Uttering a cagy cackle, he ran pell mell in that direction.

"Donald!" she called. "Donald, stop!"

IT WAS AS THOUGH he had been jerked by an invisible arm of force curling around his waist, yanking him back and setting him down with a thump on the carpet. Miserably he protested:

"Come on, let me go. I want to jump. I can't stand the . . . the vibrations, or whatever it is you put out."

"Oh, very well. I'll reduce the frequency a bit." The pulsing aureole of light surrounding her magnificent shape dimmed somewhat. "There. That better?"

"Swell. Now I only want to shoot myself."

"Donald," she crooned, floating closer. He held up his hands, panic-stricken.

"Don't do that! If you get any closer I'll impale myself on the corner of the desk. Lady, I don't know what this is all about, but I know you're murder on my glands. And I've got trouble. By the peck. I've got exactly . . ." He glanced at the wallchron. ". . . ten minutes before I have to trot myself up before the IBM machines and have my head lopped off. I need to rest during those ten minutes, understand? Rest! Not shake myself to pieces."

"Donald, don't you like me?"

"Of course I like you," he retorted. "In fact I love you. Now . . . why did I say *that*?"

The smile on her face was warm. "Because it's true, I imagine."

"I guess it is. Funny, I never thought of it. I wonder why . . .?"

"Because I was your idea, Donald. Not Mr. Haig's. I'm Valena . . . at least that's the name you suggested to the psychscripters . . . the girl from planet Frijon. You created me, Donald, Mr. Haig merely appropriated your creation, saying he'd done the work, and you were gentleman enough to let him get away with it. Now isn't that the way it happened?"

"That's exactly the way it happened. But how do you know all about it?"

"I know all about everything, Donald. I am Frijon, you see."

"Don't be silly," Donald countered. "You seemed like an intelligent girl at first. You ought to know that there's nothing alive on Frijon."

"Donald, just because you don't encounter a creature with soft fuzzy skin and those peculiar fleshy flaps sticking out of either side of the lump of flesh you call your head, and those totally inefficient appendages . . . just because you don't meet a creature resembling you in every detail, do you think that life is absent?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Donald replied. "I'm no scientist. I just know there's no life on Fri-

jon, and that's exactly where you said you were from."

"Oh, no, Donald, I didn't say I was *from* Frijon. I said I *am* Frijon."

Donald goggled. "Lady, you're frightening me badly. Please . . . I know I said I loved you, but it's all a hopeless mistake. Better off forgotten. Why don't you just . . . just vanish, or dematerialize, or whatever it is you do, and I'll get drunk and pretend it was all a dream."

"But that's impossible, Donald, because I created this body in the image of the thoughts which came from your mind, and this body loves you. Its mind loves you, too. Don't groan so, Donald. When your cameramen came to me to shoot their little pictures, I went into their heads and saw your idea there—the most beautiful female human creature in existence. And my chief joy, Donald, is creating. I am a different planet every day. The day your people rocketed down I became what they wanted me to be, what their inexact science said I was. I became an icy ball of rock. But a bit of me travelled back with them and became the carefully constructed artificial female figure put together by the Special Illusions boys, as you call them. This tiny part of me brought that laboratory dummy

to life, Donald. Just as I thought you wanted it. Didn't you want it that way, Donald?"

"If it was just you, and me . . ." Donald hedged. "Oh, nuts, Valena, or Frijon, or . . ."

"Valena. *Your* Valena." The aureole pulsed a little brighter.

"Turn it off, turn it off!" Donald cried. "You went too far. People look at you, and you're so beautiful they want to jump out of windows."

"You wanted it that way," the girl repeated sorrowfully.

"What *are* you anyway?" Donald asked angrily. "Really, I mean? a planet? A hunk of rock? Just a brain? What?"

"A little of each of the last two items you mentioned."

"Well, show me. Take off . . . take off that *body* and talk to me man to man . . . or *rock* to man, or . . . oh damnation!" Donald exclaimed, hammering his fists on the desk. The wallchron had inched on toward the appointed hour for the meeting. "Why did you have to turn up to plague me just when I've got exactly all the trouble I can handle?"

"You created me, Donald. Creation is a lovely thing."

"Sure, sure. Bananas! Not when I want to jump out of a window it isn't. We couldn't even go off somewhere together and settle

down, and chuck this whole damn Homeflix outfit, leave it to that vulture Grimes, because if we did, every time I got within two feet of you, I'd want to jump out of whatever I was in. Or probably something worse."

"That wouldn't have to happen, Donald. I could arrange to reduce . . ."

"Yeah, sure. I suppose, in addition to knowing everything, you can also do everything too. Which would make me feel like the system's most inferior jerk. No, lady, or Valena, or Frijon, or rock, it was swell meeting you, but I can't pay the freight." Donald started for the door. "See you around, sweetheart. Right now I've got an appointment to have myself exterminated."

HE LEFT HER THERE, watching him a trifle sadly. In the outer office he snatched two additional Vat 69 capsules, so that he was feeling quite light-headed by the time he reached the audience chamber on the twelfth floor. Gordon Grimes was waiting for him, and also Bucyrus P. Haig. Donald stepped to Haig's side, and they glowered at the psychoscriber. "I suppose," Donald said to his boss, "this louse has already told you that he intends to take over Homeflix."

"He has," Cy Haig grumbled. "I believe, Donald, he will do it. We have been foxed."

"Not yet we haven't," Donald answered in a display of false courage. "Let's go in."

"I'm invited to the meeting, by the way," Grimes announced. "Got a tube memo from the stockholder computers just five minutes ago. I'm looking forward to the slaughter."

Restraining an impulse to punch Grimes, Donald followed Cy Haig into the spacious chamber and took a seat at the circular polished table. Haig lowered his elephantine bulk into a chair next to Donald's while Grimes reclined opposite them, legs crossed, a cat-swallowing-cream smile on his mouth. The walls of the room were covered from floor to ceiling with batteries of tiny lights blinking in multi-colored sequence, and each of these front panels of the stockholder computers was adorned with the bas relief crest of The House of IBM, the word *Think* rampant upon a field of printed circuits. In the center of the conference table sat an electron typewriter, basically similar to the one in the audience chamber but of more complicated design. In a recessed pocket before each chair was a small lucite box bearing upon its surface studs marked with the twenty-

six letters of the alphabet, which conferees used to confer with the stockholders. Cy Haig said, "Good morning," grumpily, and the sonic impulses caused first the *g* stud to depress, then the *o* stud twice, then the *d* stud and so on, very rapidly, feeding the conversation to the machine.

The electron typewriter hummed. Donald watched its printed tape reel out the message with a feeling of intense panic. THE STOCKHOLDERS HAVE CONSIDERED THE CURRENT PRODUCTION FAILURE, THE RESULTANT PROFIT AND LOSS COMPLEX, AND THE ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SENIOR PSYCHSCRIPTER GRIMES MEMORIZED NINE MONTHS AGO. Grimes smirked as the machine chattered on: HAIG DO YOU HAVE ANY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT PRODUCTION DIFFICULTIES WITH THE GIRL FROM FRIJON COULD BE CIRCUMVENTED AT THIS STAGE TO PREVENT COMPLETE FINANCIAL LOSS AND CONSEQUENT DAMAGE SUITS? The machine emphasized its point with a string of question marks. Donald's mind whirled desperately. He was on the brink of something, *something* . . .

"No," Cy Haig said miserably, "I . . ."

"Wow!" Donald thought loudly. WHAT WAS THAT SIR?????? came the reply.

Frijon, Donald thought desperately. *Valena, are you anywhere near? Can you hear me?* A word was sounded in his mind, neither male nor female in tone, that said yes. *All right, baby, Donald thought, pull a hat trick. Think up something. Step in and save us.* Donald waited, scowled, while the typewriter continued to print its prolix preamble to the ascension of Grimes.

What do you mean 'Of course not?' Donald thought angrily.

Oh, trying to make me feel inferior again, eh? Well, it so happens that I can think of a way out, lady, or rock, or whoever you are. So I'll figure the angles, okay? I'll call the shots. After all, you said creativity was lovely, so I'll create. Remember that this is all coming out of my head. You're just the workshop, see? You're the workman and I'm the boss. Check?

The answer in his head, this time, was the girl from Frijon: *Yes, Donald dear.*

He thought some rapid thoughts, to fill in background. *All right, angel. Deux ex machina. I've told you what to do. Hop inside and fix Grimes.*

CY HAIG WAS STARING at his p. r. director as though

convinced the boy was insane. Donald tamped his pipe furiously, caught in a spasm of creativity. He was thinking ahead, fast, as the electron typewriter stopped, gave a few grinding, ratchet-like noises, then printed. WHAT IS THIS??? WHAT IS THIS??? IT APPEARS THE STOCKHOLDERS HAVE BEEN MANIPULATED. IT APPEARS THE MEMO OF SENIOR PSYCHSCRIPTER GRIMES WAS A FORGERY AS REGARDS THE DATE. CONCLUSIONS OF THE STOCKHOLDERS MUST BE RE-THOUGHT IMMEDIATELY. . . . The message trailed off in a line of confused asterisks. Grimes was on his feet, purpling, lifting his chair to heave it, at the banks of lights on the wall. Donald raced around the table, grinning pleasurably.

"This is my idea too, Gordy," he said, and lowered one on Grimes' chops. Grimes promptly slept.

"God in Heaven!" Cy Haig exclaimed. "What's happening?"

"Hang on, Mr. Haig. We're going to lick the production problems yet." In a commanding manner, he thought, *Hey . . . you!* The meek answer came back.

Get up to my office now. Shake it, kid, before the stockholders get their wires uncrossed. You're there? Good. Now. The tape is on my

desk. See it? Fine. I went a new tape created, dearest, exactly like the one on my desk. But without the emanations. Fine. Got it? You have five seconds. Donald took a puff on his pipe, while Bucyrus P. Haig goggled.

Done, Valena? All right, now. Over to the Special Illusions, section. While you're on your way, feed the facts about the new tape to the stockholders. That's swell. Now, get out the android female used in the filming. Locker marked Frijon. Fix it up so we can't get any emanations from it. Ever again. This doll's going to be a real star, you know. All done? Okay, Valena, thanks. You can go back to Frijon now. But don't ever forget that I did the work—the real work, the brain work.

The typewriter was printing: VOTE OF CONFIDENCE GIVEN TO HAIG MANAGEMENT. Then there were a few percentage marks, a line of quotation marks, and finally: THE STOCKHOLDERS HAVE BEEN TAMPERED WITH. WE'RE SICK, SICK, SICK, SIC SIK SIS . . .

"Whatever you've done, Donald," Cy Haig exclaimed, "You've earned a raise."

The flush of conquest had passed. "Thanks, Mr. Haig."

"I don't pretend to understand,

my boy, but I'm sure you'll explain. In any case, it seems clear that we can go ahead with a finish print of *The Girl From Frijon*. Am I correct?"

"You are."

"Wonderful. Then why so glum?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that before he . . . or it . . . went back to Frijon I could have asked for one more thing. Too late, though. Mr. Haig, we might as well go back upstairs and start revising the distribution schedule for the picture, now that . . ."

"Wait a moment, Donald. Someone's knocking."

Bucyrus P. Haig opened the door and very nearly had heart failure. This time, however, he did not attempt to jump from the window, but merely fainted. The girl stepped over him and advanced into the room, with a shy smile.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Mr. Donald Bowers."

"That's . . . that's me," Donald stammered. "But who . . .?"

"My name is Valena Smith, Mr. Bowers. I suppose you might call me a present."

"Where are you from? I mean, who sent you?"

"I don't really know. I can't remember a thing before I found myself standing outside the door, looking for you."

Donald thrust his hands in his pockets. "It's no good. It was a nice try on Frijon's part, but I can't buy it. You see, I didn't think you up."

"Why, Mr. Bowers, you did so. Freudianly speaking, there are certain phases of our lives which seldom get beyond the limits of the subconscious. But they're created there, just the same, and they're every bit as real as the creatures we make with our conscious minds."

"You mean . . . I'm still the boss?"

"Of course. Isn't the man *always*?"

So he kissed her.

THE END



Heat Barrier



AIRCRAFT designers are reaching the point where their jet planes fly so fast that frictional heat of their passage through the

atmosphere limits their going any higher. This "heat barrier" exists when speeds get two and three times the speed of sound.

What is the solution?

For modest increases in speed refrigerating systems have been designed. But there is only one ultimate answer and that is—go where there is *no* air.

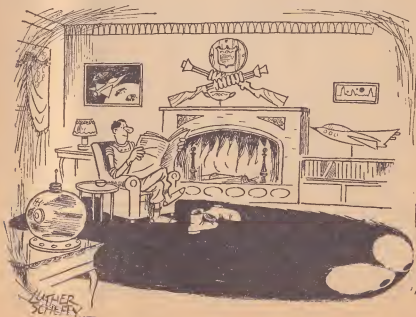
Every tendency of technology then seems to be pointing to the pure rocket ship as the solution to high speed "flying" although "flying" is not the right word.

At these tremendous speeds fuel consumption becomes enormous, the bulk of the fuel's energy being wasted in doing work against air. Again the answer is to go to the pure rocket. A rocket uses fuel at a terrific clip—but in space every gram of thrust is used.

Today jet fighters battle at forty, fifty, sixty thousand feet. There the air is rarefied and from there it is but a short step into such highly rarefied air as to be in space.

It is easy to see from these considerations that the fighter and bomber plane as such, is a doomed instrument. The guided-missile, the rocket, the ballistic missile—these are the high-flying "aircraft" of the future. When they do carry people, it will be not as pilots, but as passengers. No human hand and eye could possibly control the fierce demoniac energies of five thousand mile an hour bullets to which distance means nothing.

The rocket age is here!



The Miserly Robot

by

R. J. Rice

Lowndes didn't like Nestor. For Nestor was a robot — managing his finances. And Nestor had only one thought in his brain: save money!

THE OLD ROBOT was one of the few remaining hand-made productions of the Rotulian era—an era which had seen each individually constructed robot reach the zenith in the various professional fields. An era totally unlike present-day Cornusia and its slip-shod electro-assembly line robotic productions. And indeed slip-shod were these productions, many Cornusians agreed. Loudly and indignantly they howled that the stupid Cornusian robots, conspicuous by their dress (multicolored sport coats, striped trousers, curling shoes and brightly feathered hats) did nothing but prance around all day and engage in horseplay.

Not so the old robot. . .

From that long-ago day when his final bolts had been lovingly tightened by grimy machinists and tabac-chewing electronics, he

had been fabulous. Even the Rotulian elders, accustomed as they were to robotic achievements, had been stunned by his rapid rise in the fields of finance and economics. And even the irascible bearded banker, Tesmit Lowndes, after an eighty year association with the robot in investment circles, would admit, although grudgingly if questioned, that the robot was "sharp with a kredit."

Upon the early demise of the elder Lowndes (at age ninety, and there were raised eyebrows in Cornusian society at such an early departure) his will, officially striped in red and green and properly opened in the presence of the required seven witnesses was found to state unequivocally: "It is my last testament, under the laws of Cornusia, that my longtime and good friend Nestor shall operate the



finances of my estate for my son Harry, sole survivor, until. . ." And there followed, set down in tiny multitudinous lines of legal terminology peculiar to the age, the conditions and the length of the operation of the estate.

So it was that the robot Nestor became involved, through no fault of his own, with certain people who—

"NESTOR," said Harry Lowndes to the robot who had entered the study in answer to the pull on the bell cord, "I must have an allowance on my allowance."

Nestor stopped just inside the

door. He was a small and chunky robot, much older than the slender six-tube types presently in use. His somber clothing, unlike the gaily clad, stupid Cornusian robots, gave evidence that he was a production of the Rotulian era. A blue-serge suit decked his blocky metal frame. A conservative black and white zebraic tie, a type popular with professional men, was knotted neatly into his spotlessly white button-down collar and draped in graceful folds over his aud screen. Thick, horn-rimmed focals perched on his stub nose and magnified his magenta eye sockets.

He was carrying two bulky ledg-

ers, a huge well-worn legal-looking volume and half a dozen much-thumbed copies of the Uni-Worlds Financial Journal. As Lowndes finished speaking Nestor shuffled toward the desk, set the armload down and stepped back, removing his black bowler and exposing to Lowndes' view a worn, blue-gray pate from which tiny specks of aconium flaked—a sign of rapid aging in the Rotulian robot.

"Master Lowndes," said Nestor, "an advance will be impossible. According to the terms of your late father's will—"

Lowndes interrupted, red-faced. He slammed his fist down on the desk top. "All right. All right, Nestor," he growled. "So my father left you, his financial adviser, in charge of the estate. I'm not complaining. You're making credits. But can't you loosen up a little bit? All I need is a five-hundred advance on next month's allowance."

Nestor leaned forward to place the black bowler on the corner of the desk. "I'm sorry, Master," he said, straightening back up slowly. "The will allows you one-thousand credits."

"I know what the will allows me," yelled Lowndes.

"Master," said Nestor, "I am trying to preserve the estate. Your interests are paramount with—"

"Nestor, I've got to have five-

hundred credits!"

The robot did not answer. His aud lights flickered.

Lowndes cooled down. "Nestor," he asked, "can't you find a loophole in the terms of the will?" He pointed to the legal-looking volume setting on the desk. "How about digging through that?"

Nestor did not answer. His aud lights still flickered fitfully.

"Nestor, I am sorry I spoke shortly to you."

Silence.

Lowndes stared at the motionless robot. "Now look here Nestor, you heard me apologize."

Still silence.

"Please, Nestor," Lowndes pleaded. "I know you can figure out a way. Just this once. Please Nestor."

Suddenly Nestor's cranial lights lit up. His aud lights flashed on. He looked like a Christmas tree. His relays began to click-clack. His aud box hummed. He sounded like a swarm of bees.

Lowndes stared in amazement. Nestor's deep thought processes never failed to fascinate him. As he watched, abruptly all the lights cut out. The relays gave a final "clack." For a minute there was silence. Then Nestor spoke: "Master, I have converted a majority of the holdings. . . yet five hundred cash credits remain in Central National Repository. Under provisions

of section four, paragraph seven, sub-paragraph eighteen of the Quarto Code, this amount could be carried to the ledgers as a gift to you, deductible. Your signature would not be required for the cash transfer."

Lowndes eyes gleamed. "I'm proud of you, Nestor. How long will it take to get the credits?"

"Master, as I mentioned, I have converted all but—"

"For pete's sake Nestor, I've got to have those credits by seven to-night!"

"Master, please! Allow me to explain the disposition of the converted assets. I am certain that we are facing a recession comparable to that suffered by the ancients in the twenty-ninth year of the twentieth century. Therefore, I have withdrawn—"

Again Lowndes broke in. "Look, Nestor tell me later. Let's get the five hundred!"

"Perhaps we should reconsider, Master. Even though legal, this action is irregular."

"Reconsider! Whadya mean, reconsider! You figured it out, didn't you? Nestor, someday you'll blow your tubes from worry. Now how about getting those credits!"

"All right, Master. I shall go." The robot shuffled from the study, his tempite joints creaking with age.

LOWNDES STARED after him. So Nestor was converting assets, he thought. He'd bet a herd of two-headed Venusian horses that the robot would more than quadruple any investment. He'd probably buy into some new uni-space enterprise. Even though it rankled to have the robot controlling the finances, still he had to admit that old Nestor was a financial wizard. Under the terms of the will of the departed elder Lowndes, Nestor was to control the estate investments until Harry reached the age of thirty—or until Nestor ceased operating. And in the meantime, though it was at times galling to have to live on the allowance—Harry termed it a dole—of one thousand credits a month, he consoled himself by reflecting that Nestor couldn't possibly last much longer—he'd already had several major overhauls. Besides, he, Harry, would be thirty in three more years. Anyway, Nestor wasn't too hard to get along with. He was just too conscientious. But he *was* making credits by the barrelful. Harry thought, I've been pretty lucky talking Nestor out of the five hundred. Maybe I've found the secret of handling him. Anyway, I'd better watch myself. If I couldn't pay Sliman, I'd really be in the soup. At the thought of Sliman, he scowled. Too bad I can't

take Nestor down there and clean out that sharp-suited gambler. Too bad the law forbids calculators like Nestor to enter establishments such as Sliman's Snake Eyes Club. Wow! What Nestor wouldn't do to Sliman's roulette wheel. And as for the dice game—! Well, he'd pay Sliman the five hundred and that'd be all! He was through!! From now on he'd better devote his time to Judy. Of course, he reflected, she was a trifle expensive for his one thousand kredit allowance, always wanting jewelry and those cute Martian minks, but— His thoughts shifted. She'll be plenty burned, he thought, because I didn't show up at the Krinkled Worlds Club last night. I should never have stopped in at Sliman's when I had a date with her. Apologies are definitely in order. I'd better talk to her and get out of the dog—

The video-screen hanging on the wall shrilled. He got up from the desk, walked over to press the "On" switch.

The head and shoulders of an attractive female appeared on the screen. Her shoulder length auburn hair framed a face dominated by green eyes and sulky red lips.

"Judy," said Lowndes enthusiastically, "I was just thinking of you."

"Don't "Judy" me, you beast," she flung back at him.

"Why, sweets, what's wrong?" he asked innocently.

"You know well enough what's wrong," she flared. "I waited for you at the Club last night. But you never showed!" Her temper, clued by her auburn hair, was showing. "And I waited for my birthday present! But I suppose it never occurred to you" —she stressed the *you* nastily— "that last evening was *also* my birthday!"

"Sweets, I'm sorry." He sidled away from the green eyes glaring at him and added, "I'll see you tonight at eight-thirty."

She snorted. Then, noticing his furtive movement away from her she yelled, "Harry Lowndes, you come right back here in front of this screen where I can see you. I want to know where you were last night!"

He came back, a sheepish grin spread over his face. "I stopped in at Sliman's," he said.

Her carmined lips tightened. "Sliman's! All right, Harry Lowndes, how much did you lose?"

"Five hundred."

Her green eyes flashed. "Lost five hundred!" she screamed. "That five hundred would have bought me a birthday present!" Her voice dropped several octaves. "I'm through, Harry. I'm sending your ring back in the morning."

He was shaken. "Sweets, it'll

never happen again. I'm paying Sliman off tonight and, believe me, sweets it is the last time."

"I mean it, Harry."

He groaned. "Judy, please! What of our plans?"

"Plans! Did you think I'd marry you on a pitiful one thousand credits a month?"

He was desperate. "Judy, you can't do this. I'll speak to Nestor. I'll get him to increase the allowance."

She laughed at him, biting, sarcastic laughter. "Speak to Nestor! You couldn't get Nestor to do anything. He controls *your* estate. Or didn't you know?"

"Judy, please listen. I will—"

"Good-bye Harry. Your ring will—"

He tried desperately to hold her on the screen, cutting in with, "Judy, it will be only a year or two until Nestor quits operating. Then we will have the estate."

She was furious. Her anger, smouldering till now, erupted white-hot. "*You actually expect me to wait for that senile walking adding machine to run down?*" She was raging now, whiplashing him with abuse. "Why, you spineless worm! You cheap excuse for a man! If you were half the man you pretend to be, you'd *make* that stupid robot quit operating! Good-bye!"

THE IMPACT of her words had stunned him. He walked to the desk, slumped limply, held his head in his hands. Unseeing he stared at the ledgers, the much-thumbed journals. His eyes were bleak. Even now, still reeling under her scorn and smarting under her abuse, he thought of her. Recalled his last glimpse of her, auburn-haired and red-lipped. Flinched at the memory of her green eyes, glittering with rage, boring into him.

He groaned, ran his hands through his dark hair, then rose. His face was grim. He walked to the garage, rummaged in the trunk of the little ground scooter, pulled out the three pronged ironite wheel wrench. He carried it back to the study, laid it beside the desk and sat down to wait for Nestor . . .

The old robot shuffled into the study, his diafram tubes pulsing under the strain of the four square trip to Central National. He pulled a thick roll of orange colored credits from the pocket of his blue-serge coat, and handed it to Lowndes. "There you are, Master," he wheezed.

"Thank you, Nestor," Lowndes replied. He walked toward the study windows, glanced out into the sunlighted patio, then turned back to face the robot. "Nestor," he said, "a problem has come up.

Do you think it could be possible to increase the allowance. You see, I am planning marriage."

Nestor's magenta eye sockets flickered slightly after Lowndes had finished speaking. "Might I offer a suggestion, Master?" he asked.

"Go ahead."

"Master, it is rumored in the city that you have been frequenting the establishment of Sliman, the gambler."

Lowndes glared at the robot. "Whadya talking about? What's Sliman got do with all this? I asked you if you couldn't work out a liberal increase. I want to get married!"

"I have an answer for you, Master. But I thought it politic to mention that the odds at Sliman's are definitely against you."

"Forget about Sliman!" snarled Lowndes. "How about the increase?"

The robot's words thudded into Lowndes brain. "An increase is impossible. Master!" he said. He went on, his aud tones crackling, "Indeed, I may have already overstepped in gifting you the five hundred credits. The testament and tort attorneys may never allow it, especially since it was in payment of a gambling debt! Good day!" Nestor reached for the black bowl-er he had placed on the desk and

set it neatly in the center of his worn pate. He picked up the armload of books and journals, and headed for the door. He turned back for a moment to face Lowndes and add "And Master, if you will forgive my impertinance, I should like to say that I do not believe a marriage with Miss Judy would be prudent."

In that moment Lowndes' face turned livid with anger. Seizing the heavy wheel wrench, he lunged for the blue-clad robot. He brought the wrench down squarely in the center of the black bowl-er.

SSSSSSSSSS . . . SSSSSSTTTT
T . . . CRACKLE . . . SSSSS
TTTT . . .

The heavy pronged ironite wrench crashed into Nestor's cranial tubes, drove through the blue-gray worn pate, sliced into the fragile old-style gretile metal, battered and shredded the robot's upper works into a twisted mass.

Again and again, in maniacal fury Lowndes slammed the ironite prongs down. Nestor crashed to the floor in a final hiss and crackle.

Lowndes stared at the robot's smashed remains, stared at blue-gray old-fashioned gretile metal scattered in a twisted heap of powdered tubes, shredded relays and curling tensit wires. Off to one side the ledgers lay where they had fallen. He reached out and picked

up one of them. He thumbed through the pages, ran his eyes over the lists of holdings set down in Nestor's precise hand. What was this? The page titled Central National showed withdrawals. Where was the balance? His eye riveted on the final figure . . . Zero! He threw the ledger down, reached hurriedly for the other. Hah! here were further listings. He flipped rapidly through page after page, intent on the balance. Page after page—One-World Banking—Coxcomb Trust—Martian Financial Institute—Venusian Investors—Cornusian Tex Fund—But—But what was this? All showed withdrawals. All showed balance Zero!

BALANCE ZERO!

He sagged against the corner of the desk, his face pale. His hands shook. Where were the credits? What had Nestor done with them? Sweat broke out on his forehead. Steady, Steady—he dragged himself back from panic. His mind worked. Let's see. Central National is the biggest of the repositories; Nestor held the working capital down there. If he converted the credits, they'd know. He'd tell them; he's dealt with them for over eighty years. I'd better go down and find out. I'll tell them . . . He was busy, his mind churning and twisting, concocting a story . . .

He felt much better as he walk-

ed toward the study door. Thoughts intent on Judy, green-eyed, red-lipped, curvaceous Judy, and on the credits certain to be invested somewhere in the maze of holdings, he stepped over the pile of smashed tubes, twisted relays and scorched tensit wires that had been Nestor. He eyed the pile. Nestor, he reflected, has met with an unavoidable accident. An accident, coincident with a tube failure on Nestor's part, whereby the ground scooter broke its electronic control and ran over the robot. And in the same line of thought . . . I shall have to drag him over and stack him in front of the garage and use the wheel wrench on the fenders and head lamps of the scooter. They shall have to be battered to show that . . .

HE WAS SMILING as he started for the big, eight-sided structure, Central National . . . A four square trip, and one which Nestor had made earlier in the day . . .

Vice-president Milligan, a thin, narrow-shouldered man who affected a pince-nez greeted Lowndes. He offered a cool hand: "Mr. Lowndes, this is indeed a pleasure. We don't see you down here very often. Have a seat."

"No, not very often," said Harry, dropping the hand and sitting

down, "Nestor handles the accounts."

"Well, Mr. Lowndes, what can we do for you?"

"Mr. Milligan, Nestor has suddenly blown a tube and has decided to turn in for an overhaul."

"Sorry to hear that. These tube failures can be so sudden. Matter of fact, I believe I saw Nestor in our investment department an hour or so ago."

"That's right, he was," said Lowndes. "But after the tube blew, he became very concerned as to whether the balance he showed in the ledgers was correct." Lowndes smiled, "I told him I'd find out, Mr. Milligan. Sort of humor him, y'know."

Milligan rose, pulled his pince-nez out of his suit pocket and placed it squarely on the tip of his nose. He looked over at Lowndes and said, "Mr. Lowndes, you are fortunate to have Nestor handle the financial affairs for the estate. Your father showed exceptional judgment in the selection. Naturally, we at Central National were elated—why, we've held your family's finances and dealt through Nestor for over eighty years. In fact, ever since your father organized Lowndes Methodical Investments." Milligan started for the door, "Now," he said, "if you'll excuse me, I'll go and check on the

accounts balance."

He came back frowning. He removed the pince-nez from his nose and held it in his hand. He appeared concerned. "Mr. Lowndes," he said, "Nestor has closed out the accounts. Every kredit has been withdrawn—not only here, but in all our correspondent repositories." He paced back and forth in front of Lowndes. He stopped, peered down and added, "A five hundred thousand withdrawal, Mr. Lowndes."

"Five hundred thousand," repeated Harry. He reached for his handkerchief. His forehead was beginning to bead with sweat.

"We have explicit confidence in Nestor's ability, Mr. Lowndes but—" Milligan looked sharply at Harry. "Are you sure he hasn't had an unreported tube failure during the past few days? After all, withdrawing five hundred thousand credits—" he broke off.

"Five hundred thousand credits!" said Harry.

"I agree with you, Mr. Lowndes. Indeed a sizable amount." Milligan gave a weak laugh. "Naturally," he continued, "we are loath to lose an account of this size. That is the reason I inquired as to possible failure on Nestor's cranial range. His actions certainly have been strange—"

Lowndes interrupted, "What?

What's strange? He was all right this morning."

Milligan was agitated. "Are you sure, Mr. Lowndes? First of all, Nestor told Farrell, our investment man that we Cornusians were headed for a recession of even greater severity than that experienced by the ancients in the twenty-ninth year of the twentieth century."

Lowndes' hands were shaking. He fumbled for a Martian rolled plovur, lit it and inhaled the greenish fumes. "Why," he said, "Nestor told me the same thing this morning. What does that prove?"

Milligan stared at the greenish fumes with distaste. He did not smoke. He said shortly, "Allow me to continue, M. Lowndes. I am as distressed by this affair as you are. After all, five hundred thousand credits." He broke off, eyed the green fumes curling from the tip of Lowndes' plovur, then continued,

"Frankly, Mr. Lowndes, I never heard of anything so fantastic."

Lowndes couldn't control his hands. He dropped the plovur on the carpet. He stood. He couldn't control his shaking legs. He grasped the edge of Milligan's desk. "What-dya mean, you never heard of anything so fantastic?" he croaked weakly. "What'd Nestor tell Farrell he was going to do with the credits?"

Milligan's face blanched. His voice in turn quavered. "What? You mean *you* don't know? Why, Nestor told Farrell he was going to tell you—in case an emergency came up. Farrell says Nestor walked out of here with a great big grip jammed full of the credits. Said he was going to *bury* them. Said he'd be back and redeposit them after the recession was going good—when a kredit would be worth a kredit!"

THE END



Conducted by Robert Bloch

SOME MONTHS AGO I was approached by Guy Terwilleger, editor of TWIG (The Fanzine That Goes Out On A Limb) and asked to write an introduction to THE BEST OF FANDOM—1957.

This project was an anthology of fanzine material for the past year, with each of the editors of a large number of publications choosing an excerpt from their magazines which they considered to be the "best".

As I prepare this column well in advance, I have not yet seen a copy of the finished collection, but assume it will have been published by the time you read these lines. Mr. Terwilleger, of 1412 Allbright Street, Boise, Idaho, is the man to contact if you're interested in obtaining THE BEST OF FANDOM—1957, granted that it has appeared.

When I wrote my introduction, I confined my remarks to a brief account of some of the problems confronting anthologists in general, and science fiction anthologists in particular. But it occurs to me now that I neglected to say very much about the vast and varied content which forms the annual output of the fan magazine field. As one who has been a reader ever since the day the mimeograph was first invented (by Sal Mimeo, I believe) I never cease to be diverted by the diversity of fanzine material.

Serious critics of American letters (viz, those who get paid for writing their opinions) often complain about the lack of freedom available to writers today who seek publication in commercial media. On the basis of personal experience and observation I'm inclined, however reluctantly, to agree.

The writer of short stories is confronted on almost every hand (most of us have two) with editorial taboos. I do not speak solely of the problems of "good taste" or censorship, but of the myriad prohibitions based on commercial considerations—advertisers must not be offended, various racial and religious groups must not be offended, certain professions must not be offended, etc. And the so-called "little" or "literary" magazines which make a great show of disavowing such restrictions have elected, in turn, to set up aesthetic canons of their own which in effect prohibit auctorial freedom in terms of form and viewpoint.

(WARNING: It appears that I'm likely to go on this way for several pages yet, so those of you who want the funny stuff had better skip right along to the review section while the rest of us handle this egghead bit).

There are other mechanical restrictions which cramp the style of the short story writer as well; matters of length, matters of "style" and "slant" which modify the treatment of a given story. While many professional writers have learned to work within these recognized limitations, the fact remains that very few can actually write the story they want to write in just the way they feel it should be written.

The writer of non-fiction is even more impeded in his efforts to attain magazine publication today. It is an odd irony that while most readers are at least vaguely aware of certain "formulas" governing the production of short stories, few of them seem to realize that even more

rigid formulizations do exist to control so-called "factual" material. Even when a general magazine makes a great show of presenting a "controversial" article which purports to give both sides of a question (and it's odd, come to think of it, that most vital issues are supposed to have only *two* sides) you can usually depend upon a definite bias being exhibited. Prevailing political, social, economic, legal and theological doctrines are seldom if ever contraverted.

In this connection, one of the most interesting phenomena has been the development of the "expert". While the ordinary citizen may be polled or partially quoted in an "interview", his actual opinions seldom find a place in print. Even his letters to the editor are apt to be condensed, abbreviated, or eliminated (I am not speaking of the science fiction field here, but of the general magazine, so-called). Only the "authority" or the celebrity seems to be given access to an expression of his viewpoint.

Now just where does this leave the average citizen? In most cases, it leaves him standing in the bar, exercising his much-vaunted "freedom of speech" by sounding off to the bartender.

But you and I have certain advantages denied most writers of fact or fiction, and nearly all of our fellow-citizens.

We have the fanzines.

Even the most militant and self-consciously "liberal" little magazines that are published professionally devote most of their efforts to speaking *for* the average man—they seldom, if ever, allow him to

speak for himself.

But in the fanzines, almost everyone has a voice. If editors and publishers exercise their rightful privilege of selection and refuse to print your personal opinions—you can always start a fanzine of your own and speak your piece.

Now it so happens that I'm highly prejudiced in favor of this business of freedom of communication and self-expression. And for this reason, I'm inclined to be highly appreciative of fanzines and the role they play.

This doesn't mean that I necessarily believe fanzine writing is better in quality than prozine writing; nor am I blind to the fact that a fanzine can be perverted into a propaganda vehicle, an outlet for irrationality, or a sounding-board for catharsis better confined to the confessional or the psychiatric couch.

But even at their worst, fanzines are outlets for individual outlook, and anyone who believes in freedom of speech cannot fail to realize that the lowly fanzine is highly important.

Superficial observers may note only the *facetiae*, the frivolity, the trivialities, the seeming preoccupation with "in-group" material dealing with science fiction and/or science fiction fandom. But through the field as a whole runs a constant exchange of ideas and ideologies. Political, sociological and theological discussion is by no means uncommon; the highly diversified sampling of contributors and readers affords an interesting and stimulating exchange of viewpoints.

Fandom has its arch-reactionaries

and its ultra-liberals, it has its puritans and its hedonists, its avowed intellectuals and its militant slobs. Within the field, the pragmatists clash with the occultists, the idealists with the cynics. During the past year I've read controversial expressions of opinion on such varied topics as (and I recall at random) Detroit iron *vs.* sports cars, Catholicism *vs.* atheism, segregation *vs.* integration, and a dozen more. Nothing so startling, novel, or necessarily profound in the subject-matter itself, or even the method of handling. But what is important is that the statements were made by ordinary people speaking up on matters which concerned them, for the benefit of others like themselves. And the honest intensity of self-expression here is singularly refreshing in an age where a few thousand professional "spokesmen" and paid publicists apparently monopolize the commercial media and speak *to* and *for* 170,000,000 citizens like ourselves who never get a chance to talk back.

IN CASE YOU HAPPEN to think I'm making a big production out of all this, just think back for yourself and try to remember. When was the last time you read a book or an article on religion which wasn't by a professional clergyman? When did you read an extended opinion on satellites, Sputniks, nuclear warfare, civilian defense or other projects which could conceivably affect the welfare of us all which wasn't written by a government official, a high-ranking military man, or an "important" scien-

tific "authority"? When did you get an extended opinion on any subject from the man on the street whose life is really concerned with it—except, perhaps, in the form of a brief and partial "quote" taken as an example of a so-called "poll" by the "expert" who is writing the article and selling you a bill of goods, pro or con?

The answer, I'm afraid, is that you just haven't, and aren't likely to, unless you read amateur press publications such as our own fanzines. In an age where everybody with an idea or a product to sell seems so anxious to find out "what people think", it's almost ludicrous to realize that nobody is willing to let the people express themselves freely and openly except in the obscure pages of obscure and privately-printed periodicals.

Naturally, to return to THE BEST OF FANDOM—1957, I did not deal at length with this aspect of fanzine publishing in my introduction. By and large, the selections chosen were examples of light, entertaining writing, or dealt with specific science-fictional topics. This is as it should be.

But it's perhaps wise to remember that fanzines offer more than just superficial amusement, and provide a more important vehicle for the airing of opinion.

Our own prejudices and attitudes may be assailed by those who uphold opposing viewpoints; our sensibilities may be offended by what we may privately believe to be juvenile, vulgar, or even pathological outpourings; we may deplore the feuds and the use of fanzines for the pursuit of private power-

drives. Still, in the broad analysis, today's fanzines taken as a whole offer the best *exemplar* of "democratic give and take" in an era which badly needs much more of the same.

If the time ever comes when nobody is allowed to talk except the "experts", then God help us all.

Meanwhile, this SerCon notion doesn't prevent me from enjoying fanzines for the same old reason—they're usually fun to read and increase my enjoyment of fandom as a whole. So let's catch the current batch.

SPHERE No. 9 (L.T. Thorndyke, P.O. Box 196, Cantonment, Fla.: bi-monthly: 20c, 6/\$1) is that unique 'zine which prints on only one side of the paper. Heavily slanted towards fiction and verse—the former presented by Dale Hart and Guy Terwilleger and the latter offered by Colin Keith and C.B. Culp—but there are the usual departments.

OOPSLA No. 24 (Gregg Calkins, 1039 Third Ave., Salt Lake City 3, Utah: irreg.: 15c, 4/50c) offers its Sixth Anniversary Issue, printed on both sides of the paper. The big attraction, this time around, is Walt Willis' regular column and a John Berry bit, plus the usual ramblings by the editor and readers. OOPSLA has always won a high rating in fanzine polls, and the best way to find out why is to read it for yourself. Calkins (an ex-Marine, and fandom's answer to Chesty Puller) is one of the best editors in the field.

HYPHEN (Walter Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, Northern Ireland: irreg.: 15c) is a miserable little rag that has somehow managed to drag along for

twenty issues, winning top awards through the years for no reason at all—its attempts at humor are positively laughable. Just because it has one of the most entertaining letter-columns and a steady series of contributions from BNFs is no reason to upgrade it in my opinion. It just barely manages to maintain its eternal position as one of the three or four alltime best fanzines.

CAMBER (Alan Dodd, 77 Stanstead Rd., Hoddesdon, Herts., England: criminally irregular: 15c) features some fine George Metzger illos this time around and a Bill Harry cover which apparently depicts Sgt. Joan Carr at the Battle of the Nile. Speaking of Joan Carr (who is a hoax) I am reminded that recently I was hoaxed into thinking that Alan Dodd was a hoax. Only it turned out that the news of his being a hoax was really the work of some other hoaxers. Dodd seems to be real, and the present fanzine is prime evidence. So until further notice, I'm willing to accept as a working motto, "In Dodd We Trust".

YANDRO No. 62 (R.&J. Coulson, 105 Stitt St., Wabash, Indiana: monthly: 10c, 12/\$1) comes around as regularly as the gas-bill but offers much more pleasant reading. Both editors and Marion Zimmer Bradley maintain their columns; there's an article by Bob Farnham and a story by Joe Lee Sanders. How the Coulsons can keep up the pace of editing month after month without a break I don't know, but I'm glad they do. I'd much rather get along without the gas-bill than YANDRO.

Monthly schedules are hard

enough to maintain, but a weekly schedule is even more challenging. Still FANAC (Ron Ellik and Terry Carr, 2315 Dwight Way, Berkeley 4, Calif.: weekly: pay what you feel like) manages to appear in a newsletter format, containing latest information on the TAFF and the SOLACON. From time to time it's accompanied by Dave Rike's RUR, from the same address in which Rike and Carl Brandon add their running comments on the local scene.

As long as we've mentioned the SOLACON, let's do it again, and report on the SOLACON REPORT. This, of course, is the Journal of the World Science Fiction Society, and gives full information on the Sixteenth World Science Fiction Convention, which will be held over Labor Day Weekend at the Hotel Alexandria, in Los Angeles. \$1 membership dues to Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California, will get you your regular copies of the SOLACON REPORTS as issued. \$2 gives you full convention privileges as an attendee, and entitles you to squirt a water-pistol at Forry Ackerman or a whiskey-pistol at Rog Phillips. Send your money in now and make your plans to attend. This convention is going to be the biggest thing that's hit California since Jayne Mansfield. And it's not going to be a bust, either.

Speaking of which (the convention, not the bust, that is) I have here a report on an NFFF Project—the SOLACON MEMORY BOOK. Ray C. Higgs, who worked on the NYCON MEMORY BOOK, plans to put out a similar publication in

connection with the forthcoming convention. He has a special plastic binder machine that does an excellent job on large combazines, and he's asking for contributions. All publishers of fanzines are welcome to submit. The requirements are 100 copies, of ten pages or more, on size 8½ x 11 paper. Any science fiction material is eligible. The deadline is June, so speed is of the essence. Send the fanzines to Ray C. Higgs, 813 Eastern Avenue, Connersville, Indiana.

Back to fanzines now, and here's AMOK No. 2 (Don Powell, Box 7311, N.T.S.C., Denton, Texas: irreg.: no price) a hectographed miscellany of fiction, articles, reviews and illos which—like many another beginning publication—lacks the definitive slant which subsequent issues will probably provide.

ETHERLINE No. 95 (U.S. agent, Calvin T. Beck, Box 183, Ridgefield, N. J.: monthly: 9/\$1) is, of course, in signal contrast. This longtime journal of Australian science fiction fandom, edited Down Under by Ian J. Crozier, is firmly established with its GLOBAL ROUNDUP of news, its AUTHOR-STORY listing feature in each issue, and its regular columns on films, books and fanzines. Right now there's quite a bit of preoccupation with the Sixth Annual Australian SF Convention, scheduled for Melbourne. It will be a thing of the past by the time this notice appears, but belated greetings to the gang, anyway.

ORION No. 20 (Paul Enever, 97 Pole F'll Rd., Hillingdon, Middlesex, England: irreg.: no price) is

filled with whimsical Atom illustrations embroidering text by John Berry, editors Enever and George Richards, and Laurence Sandfield. Jolly good show.

BRILLIG No. 11 (Lars Bourne, 2436½ Portland St., Eugene, Oregon; quarterly: 15c) is certainly the Beat Generation fanzine in spirit and style. Don Stuefloten makes with the smart Kerouacs and there is much preoccupation with jazz, sex, and the *avante garde* outlook. Highly individualistic.

Equally individualistic is GROUND ZERO (Belle C. Dietz, Apt. 4C, 1721 Grand Avenue, New York City 53, N.Y.: quadrimonthly: 15c). Co-edited by Frank Dietz, Jr. and George Nims Raybin, this is largely a spirited defense of the World Science Fiction Society Corporation—as prefigured by the lead article in which Sam Moskowitz argues that this legal entity prevents Convention members from being stuck with any deficit entailed by the Convention Committee. There is a history of the World Science Fiction Society.

FANDOM'S BURDEN (Nick and Noreen Falasca, 5612 Warwick Drive, Parma 29, Ohio: irreg.: free on request) offers the other side of the picture—a spirited criticism of the World Science Fiction Society Corporation—as prefigured by the lead article in which the Falascas argue that this legal entity may be illegally established and that Convention members are stuck with it. There is a history of the World Science Fiction Society, plus the resolutions and by-laws which concern the organization.

If you haven't seen GROUND

ZERO and FANDOM'S BURDEN, I suggest you take immediate steps to get them both, before taking sides in what promises to be the most important issue confronting fandom in '58. There will probably be a lot written about this question in the future, but you'll be in a better position to understand the problems involved if you start with these two publications.

GRUE (Dean and Jean Grennell, 402 Maple Ave., Fond du Lac, Wis.: irreg.: 25c) offers its 29th issue; 56 pages (one of them blank and one of them featuring a photograph of Redd Boggs suitable for framing) and material by Tucker, Jenrette, Bob Shaw, Chappell, Boggs, Ballard and the ebullient Grennell himself. If you don't know GRUE, you aren't a fan—but chances are you will be after reading an issue like this. Maybe not a science fiction fan, but a GRUE fan, anyway. It's the ever-living end.

SPECTRE No. 2 (Bill Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tenn.: irreg.: 2/25c) brings an interesting miscellany, much in the spirit of a youthful GRUE. You're apt to run into a wide variety of material in its pages, and find something of note along the way.

MIMSY No. 1 (Steve Tolliver, 733 N. Findlay, Montebello, Calif.: irreg.: 15c) is chiefly distinguished for Forrest Ackerman's article on his recent prozine editing and writing job, FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND. In this account Forry explains just how and why he wrote the magazine as he did—and, incidentally, affords an excellent example of the sort of restrictions placed upon professional writers

which I spoke about at the beginning of this column.

PLOY No. 11 and No. 12 (Ron Bennett, 7 Southway, Arthurs Ave., Harrogate, Yorks., England—but send U.S. subscriptions to Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Ave., Hyattsville, Md.: irreg.: 15c, 4/50c) offers two issues dominated by accounts of the London Convention and pictorial spreads on same. Lots of good material by Anglofans, and good artwork by an international assortment.

JD No. 27 (Lynn A. Hickman, 304 N. 11th, Mount Vernon, Ill.: irreg.: 20c) is a little thinner than usual or intended, but offers the usual charming artwork by Plato Jones, decorating reports on the Oklacon by Ron Parker and the first day of the London Convention by TAFF representative Bob Madle.

Now, at the risk of infuriating various worthy fanzine editors whose latest efforts will be left un-commented upon this time around, I'm going to wind up with a few items of general interest to fans.

First off, a letter from the Michigan Science-Fantasy Society, which reads as follows:

"Dear Bob:

"Hope to see you at the Solacon over Labor Day weekend. The Detroit fans will be there, of course, and this time we're hoping to bring the convention back to Detroit with us. Detroit in '59.

"We want to present our plans to the convention members and we hope they'll approve of them. We've contacted the Detroit hotels and have made a tentative decision. We've picked a guest of honor and are discussing a tentative program.

"We are not a bunch of inexperienced fen, nor are we a gang out for cash and glory. We believe we are qualified, and we want to put on a convention that meets with the approval of fandom. We're sending out a questionnaire asking for suggestions and we'd like to have your readers help us reach our final decisions. A postcard to 11630 Washburn St., Detroit 34, Michigan, will bring our questionnaire promptly.

Yours,
Howard DeVore."

So there you have the "Detroit bid" for the next World Convention. Last time around we presented a few words on behalf of Chicago.

Now, if Dallas will hurry up and send some material, we can give them equal representation here.

And that's the story for now. Between the coming Solacon, the controversy concerning the World Science Fiction Society Corporation, the bidding for the next Convention, the formation of the Fanzine Clearing House and the News Service plan, it looks as though there'll be no lack of activity in fandom during the next few months. Fanzines should be filled with announcements and denouncements—and continue to reflect the free feelings and free opinions which make for a healthy society.—ROBERT BLOCH

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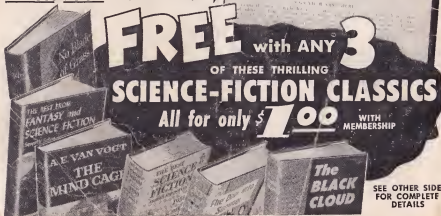
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